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Mid-market attorneys see influx of big-city work

Regional firms benefit as companies shift away from Wall Street prices

By AREIELLE KASS

4:30 am, April 20, 2009

Everyone loves New York — and New York's lawyers, who command top-dollar fees for their work. But in the recession, New York is getting a little less love. So are Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

And that's to Northeast Ohio's benefit.

Across the region, attorneys said they're seeing more business from companies that in the past didn't balk at paying Wall Street prices for their legal work. Tighter budgets, though, mean big-name law firms are receiving more scrutiny from their clients. And middle-market players in Cleveland, Akron and other Midwestern cities are reaping the benefits.

Ulmer & Berne managing partner Kip Reader said local attorneys offer a high value proposition to companies that have dealt with major-market law firms.

"We're full of good talent and skill sets and we're available at a better price point," Mr. Reader said. "People are more willing to transfer work. It's happening repeatedly, regularly. It's not a matter of once every three or four weeks. Something comes in several times a week."

Mr. Reader wasn't willing to identify new clients Ulmer & Berne has added from big-market firms over the last 18 months. However, he did say they include "major financial institutions, major health care-related companies and significant manufacturing companies" that are using the firm for work in areas such as business litigation, intellectual property and domestic business transactions.

Several lawyers said the work they're picking up often isn't from new clients, but from companies that only would have used them for smaller matters in the past.

One such company is Milwaukee-based Johnson Controls, which Alan Kopit, partner-in-charge of Hahn Loeser & Parks' Cleveland office, has been working with since 1992. Mr. Kopit said he recently added to his firm's portfolio more business from the maker of auto-motive interiors and building energy controls, specifically the company's national creditors' rights work.

"I think, by its nature, cost factors into it," Mr. Kopit said of the decision to give Hahn Loeser added work.

Not only is doing more business with a company such as Johnson Controls a boon to his practice, Mr. Kopit said, but satisfied executives there have passed his name on to other companies that now are using the Cleveland firm instead of other alternatives.

Hewitt Shaw, managing partner of Baker & Hostetler's Cleveland office, said the city's history as a mature law town puts it at an advantage over the likes of Minneapolis or Milwaukee, cities that also might have high-quality lawyers available at lower rates. Cleveland enjoys a good reputation among lawyers, he said, putting it in a good position to take advantage of opportunities that arise when clients here and elsewhere look to cut costs.

And many clients want to do just that.

'Budget-priced battleship'

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Chemical giant DuPont is among the companies that publicly have announced their intentions to move away from large law firms in favor of more midsize alternatives. Roetzel & Andress president Jeffrey Casto said that trend has increased the pace of business at the Akron firm, which does business with DuPont and is seeing more inquiries from other companies.

"It's probably tripled the level of interest," Mr. Casto said. "People are essentially trying to get equivalent service at a lower cost. A lot of projects that are done on Wall Street have nothing to do with the rates that are charged."

Robert Ross, a partner in the corporate merger and acquisition department at Calfee, Halter & Griswold and chairman of its inter-national group, said technology also makes Northeast Ohio appealing to companies nationwide because lawyers can do work for their clients from afar, connecting via telephone and e-mail instead of showing up at their offices.

And when an in-person meeting is necessary, the region is centrally located, Mr. Ross said, which makes it easy to access from New York, Chicago and any number of other locales.

Mr. Ross and Calfee intellectual property partner Georgia Yanchar said they're both working their networks and successfully bringing in more out-of-state work and business from in-state clients who had outsourced their legal services to other states.

"I say if you want to hire a battleship and you're looking for a budget-priced battleship, send them my way," Ms. Yanchar said. "It's a good opportunity for us to prove what we can do."

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