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Some Firms See Client Services As A Full-Time Job

By **Nick Brown**

Law360, New York (January 15, 2010) -- As competition for work in the legal industry heats up, some firms are creating new positions to address the pressure for better client services.

San Francisco-based Gordon & Rees LLP recently brought on Lucy Anne Galioto, a former senior vice president at AIG Executive Liability, to fill the newly created position of national director of client services.

A former client of the firm, Galioto said her job had an external and internal component. Based on client feedback, Galioto organizes training for lawyers on how best to address evolving needs in the marketplace, and works with partners, administrators, marketing directors and other members of the firm to organize training or information seminars for clients.

Mark E. Buckovich, Gordon & Rees' national marketing director, said Galioto, who practiced as a lawyer for more than 10 years before joining AIG, provided the "perfect" combination of skills for the job.

"You have a practicing lawyer who understands the business, and you have a former client who understands our firm," Buckovich said. "You can't get a more tightly wrapped package."

The move has also helped the firm's marketing efforts, he said.

"When a client requests a pitch [for services], we used to just say, 'We have this many lawyers, this many offices, great results and lots of experience,'" he said. "Not anymore. Now clients want to know what our value is, what we can do to help their business. Lucy helps us communicate that."

Galioto stopped short of saying the firm's decision to hire her reflected a change in philosophy.

"More like an emphasis on a philosophy of commitment the firm always had," she said. "The corporate culture was already there, but clients want to know that it's there. They want to see it. And we wanted the world to know that we're really committed, that we're making this an issue of real importance."

Attorneys and legal consultants said devoting new programs to client services could work wonders, but it's just one of several ways to accomplish the same goal: "Embedding strong client services in the firm's culture," said Michael Rynowecer, president of BTI Consulting Group Inc. (Wellesley, Mass.)

"I'm not so hung up on the terminology or the title — it's the initiative that's important," he said.

Rynowecer said he had seen “some very substantial client service initiatives” that didn't include any specific job titles, though a title can sometimes “help embed” the value and “provide the respect and visibility and accountability you want.”

Gary Klein, founder and president of Washington-based recruiting firm Klein Landau & Romm Inc., described another benefit of having a full-time position devoted to client services.

“It's not just a matter of providing top-quality legal services, but creating either the perception or the reality of a more humanistic view toward a client,” Klein said.

But creating a new position may not be the only way to achieve that goal.

According to a BTI Consulting survey, corporate counsel named DLA Piper — a firm without an official client services director — one of the nation's top five firms for outstanding client services.

According to Christina Martini, vice chairman of the intellectual property practice group at DLA Piper, her firm excels because it maintains a constant state of observing and responding to clients' changing needs.

DLA offers formal training procedures and mentoring for associates in client services, Martini said, and attorneys understand that “in order to progress through the organization and be successful in your career, you have to have that client savvy.”

“I think it's quite possible to effectively service clients on a myriad of levels by realizing that relationships with clients are about having an intuitive sense of who they are as people,” Martini said.

Similarly, Thompson Hine LLP has no established leader of client service initiatives, but the firm is widely credited among legal experts with pioneering the inclusion of comprehensive client service strategies.

David Hooker, managing partner at Thompson Hine, said his firm began setting up focus groups about six years ago to “make client service part of our culture.”

“We've developed internally a 'client service pledge' that focused everyone in the firm on this,” Hooker said, adding that Thompson Hine puts together teams to meet with clients on a regular basis to gauge their satisfaction.

“You can see the change in levels of satisfaction over that time in our surveys,” he said.

Hooker admitted starting up a program like Thompson Hine's could be challenging because of the demands on firm resources, both financial and otherwise.

However, experts said that costs, even in a down economy, should not be the deciding factor in what type of client services programs a firm implements.

Rynowecer said he'd “absolutely” take the gamble that the benefit of a comprehensive client services initiative would far eclipse any small expense incurred in implementing it. According to his data, some firms' client bases have grown by as much as 35 percent within three years of introducing a client service program.

Jerry Kowalski, founder of legal industry consultancy Kowalski & Associates, said firms see more profitability on a given project when a client service representative is involved than on a similar project without one.

“Loathe as firms are to take on additional costs in this market, the value added by management personnel with honed skills in these areas will enhance overall profitability and client loyalty,” Kowalski said.

Kowalski also pointed out that having a client services representative involved on a project will help firms offer clients tight, well-reasoned budget estimates.

“Where lawyers completely lack skills is on budgeting,” Kowalski said. “Projecting budgets to clients and managing the cost of a particular engagement — they just don't have the skill set.”

Hiring client service professionals with “experience in project management” is not only a good idea, he said, but imperative.

“A few have already done it, and it will necessarily gain traction because it enhances profitability,” he said. “I've been advising law firms to do that for months.”