

Legal duo join boutique small firm trend, specialize in IP

BY WILLIAM-ARTHUR HAYNES

A down economy appears to be a good time to start a boutique law practice — and that could translate to lower rates for valley businesses.

In recent years, companies' in-house legal departments have complained about astronomical legal fees charged by law firms. Responding to that sentiment, husband-and-wife tandem Mike and Staci Plumleigh, both intellectual property attorneys with big-firm as well as in-house experience, launched Plumleigh Law.

The firm is an IP and business transactions boutique and will look to translate low overhead into flexible rates for clients.

Despite a nominal office on Twin Dolphin Drive in Redwood City, the Plumleighs will practice virtually from their Bloomington, Ill., home office servicing California clients exclusively until they move back to California permanently sometime later this year.

"We've been here for three years and have been representing clients in Silicon Valley and the Bay Area for the entire period without a hitch," Staci Plumleigh said.



Mike Plumleigh



Staci Plumleigh

Mike Plumleigh said minimal operating costs will let his firm offer rates substantially lower than those charged by big-firm colleagues at the partner level.

Fee structures will include flat rates, blended rates and equity stakes.

"That's music to general counsels' ears right now," said Thomas Clay, a consultant with expertise in law firm management principles at legal consultancy Altman Weil Inc. "Anything you can do to help me reduce legal spending."

A November 2008 poll of 1,292 general counsels conducted by Altman Weil revealed that the greatest concern of more than 80 percent of respondents was "outside counsel costs" and the "unpredictable nature of legal spending." Three-quarters said their law departments would face budget cuts averaging more than 11 percent this year.

Growing business strategy

The Plumleighs are not alone in their belief that it's a good time to launch such an enterprise.

In February, four intellectual property attorneys from San Francisco's Keker & Van Nest LLP joined Stanford University law professor Mark Lemley to form Durie Tangri Lemley Roberts & Kent LLP.

Lemley and fellow partner Daralyn Durie said the new firm would forge new business models to make legal representation more affordable and efficient.

Durie said the new firm plans to charge 15 percent to 20 percent less than Keker,

and it will also be open to fixed-fee arrangements for certain jobs.

The fact that both firms practice IP is an added boost. Unlike some legal areas, IP is not necessarily contingent upon the economy.

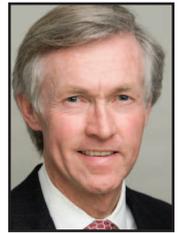
"Everybody's got to continue to protect their intellectual work product," Clay said.

Tower Snow, who was Brobeck chairman from 1998 to its 2003 demise, called the Plumleighs talented and said the business model, particularly in IP, is "a fantastic marketing approach."

"Clients are under intense economic pressure. They're looking for ways to get quality service at reduced fees," said Snow, now a litigation partner at San Francisco's Howard Rice Nemerovski Canady Falk & Rabkin PC. "By definition, a smaller shop has a leaner infrastructure, which translates to lower fees."

Gary Davis, a former Brobeck litigator turned recruiter at Patterson Davis Consulting, said Mike Plumleigh was one of the young transaction partners who helped put Brobeck on the map.

"Mike was part of that Brobeck family that was one of the premier players in the valley during the dot-com heyday," Davis said. "When he left, he was one of the main transactional partners."



Tower Snow

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