



Face Time, Surveys Boost Client Service At 17 Firms: GCs

By **Kaitlin Ugolik**

Law360, New York (November 30, 2011, 3:44 PM ET) -- While many firms have been increasing their emphasis on client service to remain competitive, a few made strong pushes toward more in-person meetings, satisfaction surveys and follow-up calls this year, earning them the designation of most improved in a new survey of corporate counsel.

Clients highlighted the 17 firms that had the most success moving up the list of those with the best client focus, according to the BTI Client Service A-Team 2012 report by The BTI Consulting Group Inc. (Wellesley, Mass.).

Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney PC and Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP are two of the firms that topped the most improved list for their increasing efforts at listening and responding to clients' needs and concerns. Buchanan, which ranked 143rd last year, is now at number 93. Drinker Biddle jumped from 184th place to 56th.

"[The most improved firms] made very conscious decisions to implement large-scale client service initiatives that are very far-reaching," BTI president Michael B. Rynowecer said. "They've made it clear that [client services] are central to their strategic initiatives, and it pays off on a systematic basis."

Other firms that received praise from corporate counsel for improving their client focus included SNR Denton, Weil Gotshal & Manges LLP, Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP, Chadbourne & Parke LLP, Dykema Gossett PLLC, Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP, King & Spalding LLP, Bass Berry & Sims PLC, McDermott Will & Emery LLP, Crowell & Moring LLP, DLA Piper, Ober Kaler Grimes & Shriver PC, Morrison & Foerster LLP and Seyfarth Shaw LLP.

Drinker Biddle Chairman Alfred Putnam told Law360 that the firm's steep climb in client satisfaction could be attributed to its recently accelerated focus on collecting feedback from clients and using it to make adjustments on a case-by-case basis.

In the past few years, Drinker Biddle has conducted two waves of in-person meetings and satisfaction surveys with more than 100 of its biggest clients. The information is collected by either a member of management or an outside consultant, rather than by the designated relationship partner, yielding more candid answers, according to Putnam.

"The information you get back is very reassuring and overwhelmingly positive, but hidden in there are a couple of little comments that are enormously useful," he said.

The concerns clients do express can range from small things, such as the length of time it takes a lawyer to respond to an email, to larger issues regarding billing or case strategy. In any case, showing the initiative to ask about satisfaction as opposed to assuming the client will draw attention to a problem reinforces the fact that the firm is interested in improving its service, Putnam said.

Not every client, or attorney, for that matter, will feel that increased client communication and questions about satisfaction fit with their legal style, but BTI's Rynowecer says a firm-wide client services initiative can have a huge impact, increasing fees, rate premiums and client retention.

"I have emphasized the need to focus on client satisfaction with the lawyers in the firm at every possible opportunity," John Barbour, Buchanan Ingersoll's CEO, told Law360. He said he tells Buchanan's lawyers, "Don't be satisfied that you think you did great work; ask the client and see what they say you can do better."

As many of the top-listed and most improved firms do, Buchanan meets personally with its biggest clients to get feedback and implements necessary changes, keeping in mind that existing clients are the firm's best source of new clients.

Hunton & Williams, which moved up the list this year from 18 to 8, has taken a slightly different approach. The firm adopted a program several years ago that challenged partners to see how many in-depth personal meetings each could have with his or her clients.

"This tends to show dramatic increases in client service, because if you're doing it across the firm, you're hitting a large number of clients and partners. It's usually the rainmakers and the high performers that are first to embrace this, and then it starts to snowball," Rynowecer said.

--Editing by Cara Salvatore.

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