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Solomon Ward Finds Smaller Is Better

Maintaining Internal Control Secret to Law Office's Success

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In an era where law firms are constantly changing names, adjusting practice areas and merging to form the ultimate international mega company, one local company has been able to stay true to its name and size. The downtown San Diego-based Solomon Ward Seidenwurm & Smith LLP has had just one name and two addresses in three decades.

“What stayed the same is that we still get together for partners meetings, breakfast and lunches with everyone sitting around the same table; what is different is that the tables keep getting bigger,” said Rick Seidenwurm, a founder and partner at Solomon Ward. The firm, formed 30 years ago with half a dozen attorneys, now has 18 partners, seven associates, two of counsel and 30 staff members.

The secret to Solomon Ward’s longevity is maintaining internal control.

“We like having control and we know we would lose it if we went to a big firm,” said Seidenwurm.

The firm has resisted the temptation to join forces with other local and national law firms over the years, according to Paul Metsch, managing partner of Solomon Ward.

“We have had a number of offers to, in essence, be swallowed up by one of the larger boys and become their San Diego satellite office. And we have uniformly rejected those offers because we like controlling our own destiny,” he said.

Metsch does see advantages of being a part of a larger firm, but said it does not outweigh the benefits of controlling the firm internally by staying small.

“We are very comfortable with who we are, the relationships we have, our financial structure and our client base,” he said.

The firm has been able to stay competitive by providing one-on-one relations with clients, offering lower hourly rates and providing attorneys with a voice, he said.

“We are finding that in the last five or 10 years a lot of the firms that we used to compete against have priced themselves so high that we are able to retain our existing clients and gain new clients that are just refusing to pay \$500 or \$600 an hour for lawyers,” said Metsch. “By providing the same quality service but at a significantly lower hourly rate, we have been able to compete effectively in the marketplace.”

Many of the attorneys at Solomon Ward, which does not disclose revenues, have joined the team from larger national firms seeking a smaller office business model.



Metsch joined the firm in 1994 from the San Diego-based law firm of Seltzer Caplan McMahon Vitek, which currently has 65 attorneys. Solomon Ward attorney Edward J. McIntyre is a former partner with Gray Cary Ames & Frye, now DLA Piper, with 3,400 attorneys.

“What makes our firm unique is that we have a structure that doesn’t allow infighting, we are very objective in our financial structure for our partnership, and we are able to attract partners who want to practice a top quality of law at below market rates in a small environment rather than a mega firm environment,” said Metsch.

Solomon Ward has a slow growth policy to attract attorneys who will remain with the firm for the rest of their career.

“We are very careful in our hiring,” he said. “We are not growing just for growth’s sake; we grow because our client base requires us to grow.”

Heather L. Rosing, president-elect of the San Diego County Bar Association, said there are a handful of San Diego-based firms that have a long history in the legal community. With 10,000 County Bar Association members and 250 firms with five or more attorneys, changes are common.

“Firms frequently form, merge, expand and dissolve,” she said. “So it is really an accomplishment for a firm to have been in existence for as many years as Solomon Ward.”

Rosing also noted that many of the long-standing San Diego firms are active and give support to the bar association.

“The SDCBA started in 1899. There are a handful of San Diego law firms still in existence today that have been around for almost as long,” she said. “We are proud of them and their contributions to the legal community.”

Like Solomon Ward, several other law firms have deep San Diego roots. Luce Forward Hamilton & Scripps LLP formed in 1873 and has grown from one San Diego office to three more offices in Carmel Valley, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Neil Dymott Frank McFall & Trexler APLC has been around for 43 years under nine different names.

San Diego-based Procopio Cory Hargreaves & Savitch LLP formed in 1946 and is now one of the largest business law firms in the region with 110 attorneys in offices in San Diego and Carlsbad.

San Diego’s renowned Gray Cary law firm formed 80 years ago, merged with Ware Freidenrich in the 1990s and eventually merged with DLA Piper in 2005.

Clients of Solomon Ward include Fortune 500 companies, commercial and investment banks, real estate and property management firms and technology companies.