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Managing partner nurtures niches

Schechtman wants SmithAmundsen lawyers to identify and pursue new areas of practice

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At the end of SmithAmundsen LLC's annual partners retreat last month, Larry A. Schechtman flexed his vocal cords.

That involved a performance by a band called Mid-Life Crisis with Schechtman, the firm's managing partner, singing lead vocals.

"To lighten things up, we decided to form a band with four partners and a nephew of one of the partners who plays lead guitar and is a real musician," said Schechtman, whose previous singing efforts involved karaoke and belting out Harry Chapin songs at a few firm functions.

The other lawyers in the band are Dennis J. Cotter on drums, Jeffrey A. Risch on bass guitar and Thomas P. Scherschel on guitar.

After the retreat dinner at the Grand Geneva Resort in Lake Geneva, Wis., the firm's 90 partners moved to an adjacent room.

There was a stage, lighting, sound equipment and partners were provided with glow-in-the-dark necklaces.

The band played five songs, including "Sweet Home Chicago" and an encore of "Mony Mony."

"It was a chance for me and the others to let our hair down before the firm's partners," Schechtman said.

Ryan B. Jacobson, a SmithAmundsen partner who has worked closely with Schechtman since 2000, said, "I'm not going to download his latest hits on iTunes. But there is no doubt that everybody left that show with a smile on their face and a comfort in knowing they've chosen the right firm to practice."

SmithAmundsen was initially known as O'Hagan, Smith & Amundsen when it formed in 1997.

At that time, it had 52 lawyers, including Schechtman, who all left Querrey & Harrow. Schechtman has served as the spinoff firm's managing partner since 1999.

James J. O'Hagan and his son Kevin M. O'Hagan left the firm in 2006 to start their own venture, O'Hagan LLC.

SmithAmundsen now has 150 lawyers working in seven Midwest offices.

Schechtman recalled a group of about 20 lawyers meeting in the living room of his Riverwoods home to discuss the spinoff firm.

"There was a lot of uncertainty at the time about whether clients would come and about signing personal guarantees to get bank loans," he said. "I think we'd all say it was the best move we've made because we've become a successful firm."

SmithAmundsen was initially known as a firm that defended insurance companies against wrongful-death and personal-injury claims.

Its insurance clients include Allstate Insurance Co., State Farm Mutual Auto Insurance Co., Farmers Insurance Group and American International Group Ltd. (AIG).

But more than a decade ago, firm officials decided to expand the breadth of services it could provide to corporate and business clients.

Some of those clients are Kraft Foods Group Inc., Target Corp., Advocate Health Care, Pella Corp. and iHeartMedia Inc.

The firm's main practice groups include labor and employment, corporate, commercial litigation, real estate and professional liability.

"We have the ability to handle all of the clients' traditional labor as well as all of their employment needs, corporate, real estate and bankruptcy matters," Schechtman



Larry A. Schechtman

*Managing Partner,
SmithAmundsen LLC*

- **Location:** Chicago
- **Revenue:** Declined to reveal 2014 figure
- **Lawyers:** 150 working in seven Midwest offices
- **Age:** 56
- **Law school:** IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law, 1983
- **Organizations:** Member, Ravinia Green Country Club Board of Directors
- **Interests:** Spending time with wife, their three adult children and grandson, playing tennis, golf, travel, following the Chicago Blackhawks

said.

"And because of our deep bench of lawyers with major trial experience, we have numerous commercial litigators who can jump in and try a case when needed."

Based on client requests, SmithAmundsen also expanded its geographic reach by opening offices in St. Louis in 2010 and Indianapolis two years ago. The firm has had an office in Milwaukee since its inception.

At the firm, lawyers are encouraged to develop niche practices.

"One of the things that sets us apart is the entrepreneurial spirit of our firm," Schechtman said. "We never require our lawyers to go out and obtain business."

"But we encourage it and provide them with the resources, like a marketing budget, to do it."

Jacobson said he worked with Schechtman to develop the firm's media and entertainment practices. Schechtman then let Jacobson run two practice areas as co-chairman of the firm's entertainment, media and privacy group and as head of its restaurant, tavern and hospitality group.

"It seemed he was generally interested in helping me grow as a lawyer instead of just serving his individual needs," Jacobson said.

One of the new practice areas in recent years was its seven-lawyer agribusiness group headed by Ruth E. Robinson, a Rockford office partner.

Another example is the 10-lawyer data security and breach group led by partners Carmel M. Cosgrave and Eric L. Samore.

Schechtman's practice focuses on defending against catastrophic injury cases, wrongful-death claims and other complex litigation. He has tried more than 50 jury trials to verdict.

Linda G. Thoede, senior corporate counsel for litigation at iHeartMedia, met Schechtman in 2008. Formerly Clear Channel Communications Inc., iHeartMedia is a mass media company which owns more than 850 U.S. radio stations.

Schechtman represented iHeartMedia in a Cook County personal-injury case, where a concert sponsor tendered an indemnity letter based on his advice, Thoede said.

Schechtman also won a summary judgment motion in a Cook County wrongful-death case in which iHeartMedia was named as a defendant.

"He provides valuable legal advice and asks the appropriate questions to do what's in the best interest of our company," Thoede said.

Schechtman also sits on the firm's executive committee. He divides his time about evenly between firm management matters and his law practice.

Last year, SmithAmundsen hired 11 lawyers and has added five more through late March.

And the hiring for this year is not done. But the firm does not have a target number.

"We are actively recruiting in St. Louis, Indianapolis and Milwaukee, so that they, like Chicago, will have the full business service capabilities," he said.

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