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FROM THE UPCOMING ISSUE

Legal networks help midsize firms reach overseas

Vesna Jaksic/Staff reporter

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Margie Bodas' firm has 36 lawyers and no offices outside the United States, but is increasingly serving clients with global needs.

"The world is really getting small as the world economy has spread beyond our borders, even here in the heartland of America," said Bodas, a partner in the Minneapolis home office of Lommen, Abdo, Cole, King & Stageberg.

Minneapolis does not have the cosmopolitan feel of New York or London, and Bodas' firm has only three locations. But thanks to a global network her firm belongs to, Bodas gets referrals and assistance on foreign matters with a click of the mouse or by picking up the phone.

As legal networks swell to include members from even the most remote corners of the world, midsize firms are increasingly relying on their reach to meet their clients' cross-border needs without opening overseas offices.

For about five years, Bodas' firm has belonged to the New York-based International Lawyers Network, or ILN, which now has 88 firms in 68 countries. The network has allowed Bodas to assist a client's needs in the Dominican Republic and get a referral from London for a mergers and acquisitions deal in Minneapolis, she said.

"It really gives you a presence in a lot of areas outside your territory," Bodas said.

Most networks charge annual fees — typically starting at about \$2,000 and some going up to tens of thousands of dollars — and require members to attend annual, and sometimes regional, meetings. Networks typically screen prospective firms and do follow-ups with clients to ensure quality of service.

Kip Reader, managing partner of Cleveland's Ulmer & Berne, said that being part of Lawyers Associated Worldwide, or LAW, eliminates the need for an overseas office.

"It allows a firm not to have to bear the incredible amount of overhead costs required to set up an international network of offices in places that may turn out you don't need assistance in," said Reader, whose firm has about 180 attorneys in three offices in Ohio and one in Chicago.

Reader said he often turns to the network several times a week, such as to find member firms in Asia when several local companies wanted to open production facilities in China. The network is also useful for quick advice, such as tracking down a real estate broker in a European city, he said.

Lawyers said they get plenty of referrals through their networks since they typically ensure there is limited representation from each geographic area. Being the only firm in Nevada for the ILN was appealing to Hale Lane Peek Dennison and Howard, said Timothy Lukas, the 50-lawyer firm's managing shareholder in Reno. As more casinos get built around the world, the network could help draw clients looking for Nevada's gaming industry legal experts, Lukas said.

The networks have ballooned in recent years to include members in places such as Burpengary, Australia; Limassol, Cyprus; and Accra, Ghana. Most target firms are considered midsize in their markets, and one network includes a solo practitioner in Luxembourg, a European country smaller than Rhode Island.

The ILN has nearly doubled in the last five years and now tracks about 500 formal referrals among members yearly, although members believe that three times as many actually take place, said Alan Griffiths, the network's executive director. The Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Network of Leading Law Firms has 51 firms, including 11 new ones this year, said Sandra Boyer, its executive vice president. LAW has almost doubled in size in the last five years and now has nearly 95 member firms in more than 50 countries, said its chairman, Christopher McCracken of Ulmer & Berne. The network may soon look to recruit member firms from Malaysia and Africa, he said.

LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell lists about 120 legal networks, most international in scope. They include the Houston-based Lex Mundi, which has 160 member firms in 99 countries. TAGlaw has more than 150 firms in nearly 100 countries and the World Law Group is a network of 48 law firms on six continents.

John Pruellage, chairman of St. Louis' Lewis, Rice & Fingersh, said the ILN recently helped him serve a client with a Canadian operation, as a member lawyer in Canada quickly offered advice on Canadian tax law. Martin Beirne, managing partner in the Houston office of Beirne, Maynard & Parsons, said he once got a referral from an ILN member in Estonia. In another case, the network allowed him to put together a global team for a client requiring proceedings in Switzerland, France and England, he said. McCracken said a LAW member firm once coordinated a case in which serving a client involved 14 member firms in 14 countries.

Many lawyers said being a part of a professional network takes the guesswork out of referrals, which have become more common as clients do business in a global marketplace.

"The network really promotes getting to know each other on a personal basis," said Kathleen Deutsch, a partner in the West Palm Beach office of Florida firm Broad and Cassel, which belongs to LAW. "We know exactly who to call and people are extremely responsive."

William O'Neill, a partner at Cleveland-based McDonald Hopkins, said being a part of a global network such as the ILN is crucial for firms without offices abroad.

"You want to be able to fully service your clients and as the economy becomes more global, you need to respond to that," said O'Neill, who chairs the 130-attorney firm's litigation department.

"If your firm is not in the position to handle the global needs of your client, there's a risk that your client will find a firm that can."