

Banker Lopez Gassler expands 18 percent while other firms scrimp

So long boutique, hello powerhouse

BY JANE MEINHARDT
STAFF WRITER

TAMPA — When veteran lawyer Robert E. Banker and some of his colleagues left Fowler White Boggs last year in an amicable split for business purposes, they intended to create what he described as a large trial boutique firm.

Now, Banker Lopez Gassler is even larger and pursuing more growth at a time when many law firms are conducting layoffs and instituting compensation cuts.

The Tampa-based firm has 72 lawyers now, 11 more than when it opened its doors Nov. 1. And the firm already has the financial depth to boost compensation.

"I don't believe in cutting back," said Banker, formerly a name partner at Fowler White Boggs. "We've given raises to everyone and plan to give even bigger ones."

Banker's firm is running counter to trends, especially for a new firm. The economic doldrums have affected even larger, older law firms, forcing them to take drastic measures such as layoffs and pay cuts to stay alive.

The federal Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the legal services industry lost 2,700 jobs last month.

ELSEWHERE, CUTS

Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney, a full-service national firm based in Pennsylvania



Joseph K. Lopez, Robert E. Banker and Frank H. Gassler left Fowler White to form a new law firm.

with a Tampa office, cut all associates' salaries between 5 percent and 10 percent.

Holland & Knight, one of the Tampa Bay area's most prominent firms, recently cut the salaries of associates and some senior counsels due to economic conditions. The total pay reduction approximates 7 percent, according to a firm release. The firm also laid off about 70 lawyers firmwide early this year.

Banker Lopez Gassler is taking a different approach.

"We've added some experienced trial lawyers and some young trial lawyers

who have graduated law school this year," Banker said.

The firm's major expansion plan focuses on increasing its presence in Fort Lauderdale where it has three lawyers now.

Banker Lopez Gassler has six lawyers now in Fort Myers and plans to hire two more in the next several months. The firm also intends to hire for its Jacksonville office, which currently has one lawyer.

"Everything we do is trial," Banker said. "We had a lot of clients at Fowler White, ones we've had for years, and they came with us. I think when you're doing the best job you

can, you can make a decent living."

30 WINS, ONE LOSS

The firm's lawyers tried nearly 30 cases this year and lost one, Banker said. Banker Lopez Gassler's corporate culture strategy is to view itself as a family with employees who like their work and have fun, he said.

Firms that are 100 percent litigation are faring better in this economy because litigation is one of the areas still thriving, said Byrd "Biff" Marshall Jr., president of GrayRobinson, a full-service statewide law firm with 41 lawyers in its Tampa office.



Marshall

GrayRobinson's work is about 60 percent litigation. In this fiscal year, the firm has hired about 20 lawyers, including eight in Tampa, and has beefed up its intellectual property and technology-based groups.

The firm expects to increase associates' salaries and pay bonuses, Marshall said. Firms that cut associate salaries may have been paying too much and faced client pushback for hourly charges, he said.

"High associate salaries mean high hourly rates," Marshall said. "We didn't overly raise our associates' salaries, and our associates are busy."

Like some other firms, GrayRobinson faces issues with accounts receivable but has had a good year. Marshall expects a 12 to 13 percent increase in revenue for the year.

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