

Pop-Up Law Offices

Short-term offices help take the risk out of geographic expansion.

By Ed Wesemann

Law firms are constantly seeking ways of serving clients in new locations without the commitment, expense and risk of actually opening an office.

We've seen firms attempt affiliations where a relationship is created with a local firm either directly or through a law firm network. But clients see that for what it is and quickly realize they are being shuttled off to some other firm with which their lawyers have only a passing familiarity. From the client's perspective, using a law firm that is affiliated with their lawyers is like eating at a restaurant recommended by a hotel concierge - you're not sure whether you are there because it is the best restaurant for what you want to eat or because the hotel is getting a piece of the action from your dining bill.

"Best Friends" relationships among law firms is one step better. At least in the classic usage of the term, best friend firms are long-term situations where the law firms work together frequently and know and trust each other well. Unfortunately, in many best friend situations, the firms involved are not providing each other with enough reciprocal business to justify the restrictive exclusivity involved so the relationship deteriorates along with the standards of practice and the priority given to clients of best friends firms.

An interesting new alternative is what has come to be known as the "Pop Up" office. In part, this has occurred as the result of the glut of commercial real estate in many markets as well as the availability of very short-term office rentals. At the same time, the availability of surprisingly high-quality contract lawyers permits firms to open a presence in locations with a minimum financial investment. Pop Up offices work particularly well when they support a litigation matter or some other reason for having a presence in a location.

While the concept of Pop Up may seem a little flighty for a conservative law office, there are some significant advantages. The quick set up of a Pop Up office permits a firm to test clients' reaction to their presence in the location, the availability of laterals in the marketplace and the reality of anticipated synergies, with a minimum financial investment. Plus, if the office fails to meet its short-term objectives the set terminations of leases and employment contracts provides a built in "sunset" decision point.

Perhaps the most interesting use of Pop Ups is in developing legal markets in Asia and Africa where a formal representative office may be too cumbersome and expensive to create without a known revenue stream. Often couched as "consulting offices" in locations where the practice of law is highly restricted for foreigners, Pop Up offices provide a real life "proof of concept" for what could otherwise be a highly risky financial investment.

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