

# Law firms boost their image and client base by going social

By **MICHAEL H. SAMUELS**

For the past year, Craig Johnson's little-firm-that-could has been growing by leaps and bounds.

After starting out with just eight partners in May 2008, Virtual Law Partners now touts 44 and is still growing.

But the firm doesn't have to worry about finding office space big enough to accommodate the growth. That's because the partners are spread out among eight states and one foreign country, and most work from home.

Virtual Law Partners is perhaps the biggest of law's newest trend - virtual firms - those that don't need office space to operate. With the use of laptop computers, cell phones, wireless Internet and computer networking, they can stay connected to each other and their clients without ever stepping foot into a cubicle-filled office.

According to the 2009 Legal Technology Survey Report by the American Bar Association, about 6 percent of more than 880 attorneys surveyed said they use a virtual office, while about 77 percent said they telecommute in some way.

"Our model is working, but it's in the early stages," John-

son said. "Name any firm that you know of and we have attorneys that are at the same level if not higher." His firm charges one-third less than a traditional law firm, which is typically saddled with overhead expenses such as an office building, equipment leasing and storage.

While Johnson is based in the Silicon Valley area of California and most of his partners are also on the West Coast, including one working in South America, many are members of multiple state bars and travel frequently to represent their clients across the country and the world, Johnson said.

"This is a lot harder than you think," Johnson said. "There are tax issues, regulatory issues, structuring issues. We have a long way to go. We know that."

While Johnson and the Virtual Law Partners are looking globally, on Long Island, there are smaller firms, such as the Smithtown-based Chase Sensale Law Group, that not only strive to be virtual, but paperless and carbon neutral.

Dennis Chase, a partner at the firm, works out of his Hauppauge home with his wife and her sister, who lives across the street, while other staff members also work from

their houses. They are connected by voice-over-IP phones, and the firm has an online database of more than 20,000 files.

"This is not just a cost-savings maneuver," Chase said. "Yes, it saves a tremendous amount on overhead, but it also allows our staff members flexibility in the hours that they work."

Chase said he started the firm in February 2008 because his law partner at his former firm was not as willing to hop on the green and virtual bandwagon at the same rate as him. He said the firm saves on warehouse storage costs by scanning all documents to CD and then shredding the paper to recycle.

"By in large, as an attorney, I don't see why you can't do this," Chase said. "I have 24/7 access to all my information. Any of my clients could call me and ask about the status of their case. I always have my laptop with me and I can provide them with immediate information."

He said when necessary he holds meetings with clients at their offices, answers his cell phone anywhere, anytime. He was one of the first attorneys to bring his laptop to court, a regular sight for lawyers now.

But virtual lawyering is more than just working from home and connecting using video conferencing or cell phone. It's also e-lawyering, said Richard Granat, head of the American Bar Association's e-lawyering task force. E-lawyering is providing legal services online such as non-contested divorces, wills, limited-liability company formation, bankruptcy and real estate leases and closings.

He said many virtual firms provide these services because they do not have the resources for other legal practices groups such as litigation, which require face-to-face meetings and conference space.

"As the generation that has grown up on Facebook and MySpace matures and has legal problems, they all want to deal with lawyers online," Granat said. "The economy has shaken up the legal profession. That has resulted in lots of lawyers being laid off. They are more open to innovation and open to new ways of doing things. Right now we are dealing with early adopters. I do not see this mainstreaming for a good three years."

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