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pricing expert believes there are too many skills required that a lawyer can’t be expected to possess alongside their legal expertise

“A lot of [lawyers] don’t have the perspective of ‘how does this fit into what the client is trying to achieve and, therefore, what is the value proposition?’” he says. “If by giving this advice I’m helping a client achieve an outcome ... that is way beyond what they were expecting, then I’m adding enormous value to their business. That then comes into the discussion around, ‘what’s the compensation?’”

Meanwhile, in seeking more value from their legal spend, clients have come to simply expect certain add-ons to regular legal services - such as secondments, research tools and training. Once upon a time, such value-adding services were seen as a competitive edge, but these days, Logan says clients merely expect such services to be included.

And clients are well aware of the competition in the legal marketplace to attract their attention and, to take advantage of such competition, are devising clever ways to derive more value from their firms.

Addressing the Janders Dean forum last month, Gilbert + Tobin partner Peter Leonard said he has seen clients progressively start to make more demands around the size, shape and composition of the specific team deployed by their law firms to execute a matter. “Getting the hourly rate, the value-adds, they are all just tickets to play,” he said. “The hard discussions now are that you have a really smart client, who typically knows your team well ... and has very specific requirements about who they want to work on a matter.”

Off this, Leonard believes the best means for a law firm to deliver value to their clients is by providing the right team, in the right blend, to deliver on the service required. “In-house lawyers know that, and once they have worked with lawyers several times they know exactly the size and shape of the team they want for a particular matter.”

Later talking to *Lawyers Weekly*, Logan agreed, noting that his firm now places emphasis on not only examining who the best people, from a technical perspective, are to staff an engagement, but to also examine the best fit in terms of who the client personalities are, what personalities make up the team and how best to accommodate the relationship. “Maybe five to ten years ago, you were getting clients who, to a large degree, were accepting what was given to them,” says Logan. “Now, they take the initiative and say, ‘this is what we want’, and they expect all the firms to deliver on a proposal that fits that set of guidelines.”

But as law firms increasingly come up with bigger and better ways to enhance the value of their client relationship, their competitors will simply catch on, rendering a once competitive edge useless. “Everyone is constantly searching for new ideas, but ultimately, those ideas get adopted by everyone else and you’re back to square one.”

What’s really important, notes Logan and other experts charged with working on pricing strategies at law firms who were contacted for this report, is the ability to harness a mutual understanding of what value means for both client and law firm. “It’s about demonstrating value ... and translating our knowledge into a commercial outcome,” says Logan. “So demonstrating some knowledge of their industry and their company, to be able to relate that knowledge to a set of challenges they are facing and being able to ... help allay those fears, reduce those risks, increase their profits - whatever it might be.”

And, of course, excellent technical expertise will always win over everything else when it comes to value.

firmprofile

SPORTS LAWYER MELBOURNE

After deciding it was time to move on from the harrowing and emotionally draining life of a criminal lawyer, Paul Horvath set up his own boutique firm to focus on sports law and represent the sporting stars of Australia.

Having dabbled in employment law after his 10 year stint as a criminal lawyer, Horvath completed his Masters in Law, with an emphasis on sports law, and opened his firm Sports Lawyer in April 2004.

With a legal team of just two, the lawyers at Sports Lawyer

manage to represent a large spectrum of clients ranging from individual athletes to larger professional bodies such as Athletics Australia and the Australian Sports Commission.

“We do everything from A to Z...anything that’s sports-related, we do it,” Horvath says.

And he proves they do in fact deal with everything and anything sports-related, listing the Australian Kung Fu (Wu Shu) Federation, go-kart racers and even a pigeon racer as clients.

Other clients include a national boxing champion, the Western Region Football League, Richmond Football Club and a number of high profile AFL players who have fallen on the wrong side of the law. It’s representing such footballers where Horvath’s criminal law background comes in handy as he deals with issues such as public drunkenness, assault or urinating in public, for example.

Horvath says his firm does a lot of disciplinary tribunal work, including AFL Tribunal matters for Richmond Football Club, and also provides advice in the areas of doping and team selection disputes.

While the firm also branches out into the provision of employment, commercial and criminal law advice, Horvath hopes to increase the work in sports law - the area that he understandably loves most. “I just love it. It’s easy to be passionate about [it] and it’s very interesting,” he says.

Also keeping it interesting for Horvath is the pro bono work his firm does through the Law Institute of Victoria’s Sports Law Committee - a committee founded and chaired by Horvath.

During the 2007 World Swim Championships, the firm’s pro bono work saw Horvath being sent to Switzerland to represent the Ukrainian swim coach, Mikhaylo Zubkov, after it was alleged he assaulted his daughter and Horvath was successful in having a lifetime ban imposed on the coach overturned.

Passionate about sport himself, Horvath says the level of passion surrounding sport can prove to be a challenge.

“[With] many sporting-related issues, depending on the level of client that you’re dealing with, there can be a lot of personal ownership and high emotions involved,” he explains. “Sometimes those high passions can exist in sporting situations which aren’t necessarily there in the commercial sphere and that’s an interesting element of the work that I undertake.”

But the upside of defending such passionate sportspeople is that Horvath gets to watch them in action and he says this is the best aspect of what he does.

“You defend Richmond players but then you want to go to the games and cheer them on from the side line and enjoy all those sorts of things. That’s a definite upside.”

- Briana Everett

