

Networking, boutique firm style

BY JENNIFER McPHEE
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Before founding the International Network of Boutique Law Firms in 2003, New York City lawyer Steven Spielvogel faced a perplexing problem when clients and prospective clients came to him with matters outside his core expertise.

He didn't feel comfortable taking them on himself, but he didn't want to tell clients that he couldn't help out. However, referring them to friends, who were partners at large full-service law firms, was also risky.

"The concern was that even though these friends wouldn't poach these clients and prospective clients, undoubtedly these clients would come into contact with lawyers who have no loyalty to us," says Spielvogel, who practises at the business litigation boutique Gallion & Spielvogel.

So he started referring clients to other highly credentialed lawyers at top boutique law firms.

"This way, the client would be

happy, the law firms would be happy, and we would be happy. We'd have good will and we wouldn't have to worry about poaching.

"Over time, we ended up having relationships with a lot of firms, so we thought why not introduce these firms to each other? Maybe they could benefit from these relationships."

Recognizing that boutique law firms must expand their reach in order to compete with full service behemoths, Spielvogel founded the network as a way for single-focus firms to exchange referrals and advice locally, nationally, and internationally. The network has chapters in 35 cities in the United States, and established a Toronto chapter in 2004.

Recently, the Toronto chapter hosted a cocktail party at the National Club to woo potential new members and give existing Toronto members a chance to mingle and meet members from outside of Canada.

Spielvogel hopes to eventually open chapters in Montreal,



Photo: Jennifer McPhee

Steven Spielvogel, INBLF founder; J. Gardner Hodder, president of the Toronto chapter; Dianne Saxe, INBLF member; and Marc Durant, INBLF member at the Toronto meet and greet.

Calgary, Vancouver, and Ottawa. The network's membership now includes 235 U.S. firms, six Toronto firms, and has strategic partnerships with 13 large full-service firms in Europe and Latin America.

So far, the organization's growth in Toronto has been deliberately slow because of its rigorous standards, says J. Gardner Hodder of Polten & Hodder Barristers and Solicitors, president of the Toronto chapter.

The network targets the best of the best, and these lawyers are already inundated with business, so it takes time to persuade them that the real benefit of membership isn't inbound referrals, but having a vast and collegial network of outstanding lawyers at their fingertips.

The network allows one boutique firm to join in each specific area of law per jurisdiction. Prospective members are first recruited and vetted by the local chapter president before Spielvogel examines the firm's credentials and makes the final call.

"By doing it this way, we avoid nepotism," says Spielvogel. "We avoid having the Des Moines chapter president bringing on board his not-so-good buddy from law school to be our real estate member. This way, all the members know that we have consistency in terms of quality across the board."

Hodder says the network has eliminated a major challenge for him — finding good lawyers to refer his clients to.

"A referral for a lawyer can be problematic. You don't want to spend a lot of time on it. For the most part, you can't really bill the client for it. It's something you want to get off your desk rapidly, but you want the client to be served in another jurisdiction. This makes it happen."

The network strictly prohibits the giving and receiving of referral fees, which impressed Hodder right away.

"Referral fees are a nasty business. If a client is getting bought or sold over a referral fee, the client is not being served. I feel strongly about that."

One of Canada's leading environmental lawyers, Dianne Saxe of Saxe Law Office, joined the network two years ago and says it's allowed her to become part of a large law firm, without actually having to do so.

"It makes it easier to provide top-level service as if I were in a big firm and had an office in New York. I don't have an office in New York. I have a colleague in New York who knows my name, he trusts me, and we can have a frank conversation." 