

Law & Utilities

Panel discusses legal business matters



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growth and development — hosted its first panel discussion Feb. 12. The panel was part of the group's monthly luncheons at Lawry's The Prime Rib. Organizers hoped it would give legal administrators more insight into various aspects of the legal market in Las Vegas.

The panelists were Assembly Speaker Barbara Buckley of Clark County Legal Services; Gary Goodheart of Jones Vargas; Nile Leatham of Kolesar & Leatham; Ron Thompson of Santoro, Driggs, Walach, Kearney, Holley & Thompson; Bill Urga of Jolley Urga Wirth Woodbury & Standish; and Kenneth Van Winkle of Lewis and Roca. The panel was moderated by In Business Las Vegas Publisher Bruce Spotleson.

The panel discussed several topical issues under hot debate in legal circles including law firm advertising, recruitment and retention of associates and the effect of out-of-state firms on the local market.

The panelists, most of whom work for large corporate business law firms, agreed that lawyer advertising has hurt the public perception of lawyers. Most longed for the days when law

firm advertising was not the norm.

"I think most lawyers, when we see tasteless advertising, we shudder," Buckley said. "I think many lawyers believe it denigrates the entire profession. But we're lawyers and we respect the First Amendment. We may not like what you're doing when you whirl around like a tornado on the television, but we'll fight for your right to do it."

Building a practice, they contend, is better achieved by building a solid reputation and network of close clients.

"This is a relationship business, so just putting your name out there is not going to bring in business," Van Winkle said. "With focused advertisements, you can get your name out there, but you need to build those relationships."

Goodheart said that while many firms pay outside consultants and marketing specialists, it can be nearly impossible to see if advertisements are having any effect on the firm's business.

Clients, they said, generally depend on referrals when finding a lawyer.

"I don't think they choose firms all that often — I think they choose lawyers," Thompson said. "Everyone in this room is in a service industry, our problems involve people and I think that's something people often forget. Clients want to be paid attention to and that's something we all put high on our priority list. The challenge is making the client happy, which isn't as difficult as we often make them out to be."

Van Winkle added that all lawyers are pretty much the same, but gaining or retaining clients depends greatly on how one treats clients.

The panelists said out-of-state firms have had a great impact on clients' expectations and on

the legal market in general.

Most said that while they have caused competition for clients and associates to increase, the quality of law has improved and more legal work is being done in Las Vegas today as a result of the growth these firms have stimulated.

The direct result has been increased pay scale for starting associates, which trickles down to higher rates paid by clients. Those rates are expected to stagnate for a while as salaries have balanced out and firms anticipate client objections to further increases, especially from smaller firms.

"We all work in the same market, and law firm finances don't vary much from firm to firm," Leatham said. "At some point clients are going to say, 'I'm not going to pay that.' My sense is we're not going to see salaries jumping that significantly in the near future as a result of that."

And while the number of attorneys has increased greatly along with the general population, the contributions to pro bono organizations have not kept up.

"There's a crisis in the number of people who need legal services," Buckley said. "We have seen no benefit to the average person from the influx of these firms. It only worsens the staffing challenges we face (at Clark County Legal Services)."

At a time of financial challenge, more and more people are seeking legal advice, whether over bankruptcy or renters' rights issues.

"Lawyers are not at all immune from the effects of recession," Goodheart said. "My sense is our real estate lawyers won't be as busy this year. But even when times are bad, there will be sections of our practices that are going to do well."

Urga said the legal marketplace has historically adjusted fairly rapidly to market fluctuations.

The actual running of the firms has become more complicated in recent years as well. With improved technology, firms are operating more efficiently than ever, but they still depend a great deal on their administrative staffs to keep the wheels in motion.

"Running a law firm, especially one of our size, is like running a corporation," Van Winkle said. "The gross revenue and net revenue are astronomical, so having professional management in place is essential. We're lawyers and trained as lawyers. So having people running the business side who actually understand the business side is vital."

A major part of that change is in associates themselves. The panel agreed they are more skilled than previous generations and are able to use technology to work more efficiently. As a result, the number of administrative staff needed in a law firm has dropped. At the same time, the associates of today expect a better work-life balance and more respect early on than their predecessors.

"They've spent their first 20 years of their lives with every team getting a trophy and being told 'you are really special' — and they all believe it," Goodheart said. "They bring that attitude with them."

"Everyone is unique — just like everyone else," Leatham quipped in response.

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