

## WORKING TOGETHER

It's considered a tradition: Lawyers and accountants have been working together to advise business leaders for what seems like forever.

What's changing are the ways they can help companies and each other grow their businesses.

The *Business Journals* Law & Ac-

counting section covers the work the two professions are doing together, what they expect to be working on in the future and how they refer business

back and forth.

Very often, the trends lawyers and accountants see coming become the next crucial business issues for the region.

### Lawyers, accountants play poker, watch golf to grow business

BY OSCAR PEDRO MUSIBAY

Some show up to the glass and canvas chalet on the 18th hole at the Honda Classic in suits, others in polo shirts and khakis.

At the busy Palm Beach Gardens event, bankers, lawyers, accountants, real estate brokers are feeding. They're also hunting for business.

Greenspoon Marder senior partner William Berger declined to give the price of the venue, but these chalets cost about \$45,000. What Berger will say is that you have to spend money to make money – especially in tough times – by meeting with those who represent business to your firm, like accountants. It's the way to build relationships with prospective clients and those that will refer clients. It's about familiarity, established through handshakes, back-pats and introductions.

Greenspoon Marder is sharing the 45-person space with Suffolk Construction and CSI Property Management. They are all seeking to diversify, meet and greet, and make rain when it feels like drought lingers.

"In this economy, it is important to stay connected," Berger said. "Everyone is looking for business, looking for clients. We are all in the same boat. And, I find it very rewarding coming out here."

In both good and tough times, it seems the professional lives of accountants and attorneys go together like Southerners and mint juleps. There has always been overlap between these "trusted advisers," but each professional is increasingly calling on the other to help navigate rough economic seas.

Attorney Ian Martinez, of the Law Offices of Martinez, P.A. in Coral Gables, said he talks to accountants he deals with on a weekly basis. Usually, his referrals come from CPAs.

For example, a CPA will discover one shareholder is embezzling from another, and counsel the aggrieved party to seek out an attorney. Martinez said he, the accountant and shareholder will then sit down and map out a plan, which usually involves sending a demand letter to the suspect shareholder.

If a company's accounts receivables are late more than 180 days, an accountant will suggest that an attorney contact the delinquent business to clear the outstanding balance.

While frequent interaction is common with the CPAs he typically works with, contact has become more frequent in the last



MARK FREERKS

Attorney William Berger with CPA Martin Cass of Cass Levy & Leone at the Honda Classic.

year, Martinez said.

Lawyers usually call on accountants after establishing liability in commercial litigation cases or when dealing with divorce to apply lost profit and damage models. Attorneys on the other side will have their own accountants there to challenge the results, said Tanya M. Ferreira, a principal at Kaufman Rossin & Co. in Miami.

"They'll look at your number and say it's too high because you didn't consider various concepts," she said.

Client costs factor differently for CPA Steve Templeton, who considers them when referring attorneys to clients. He said ordinary transactions – like leases, transactions closings and reviewing documents – can usually be handled by a wide range of lawyers. But, in complex cases, price will not be a determining factor for a referral.

"When you need something that has to be 100 percent correct, then we might say, 'It has to be this attorney,'" said Templeton, principal of West Palm Beach-based Templeton & Co. "We say, 'Go to that attorney and forget about the price.'"

#### PRICING IN THE CONTEXT OF TIME

Michael I. Daszkal, a principal at Boca Raton-based CPA firm Daszkal Bolton, said he considers pricing during his legal referrals,

but in the context of time. He can contact a large firm with attorneys that charge \$700 an hour, but they might not "hold the hand" of

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**William Berger** | Senior partner, Greenspoon Marder

his client. Instead, he may opt for a small firm that charges less, but is eager for the business.

Currently, both CPA and law firms say they are working hard to get every client, no matter how small. Daszkal said he recently won a job to deal with a company's 401(k) plan, quoting \$22,000 on a job that would have generated \$30,000 a year ago. He soon lost the job to the largest CPA firm in Miami-Dade County, which quoted \$15,000 for the business.

The bottom line for Daszkal is that the client is king, he says, and, in the end, the decision to partner with an attorney on a matter

is determined by the client. For example, a construction company client in Texas determined what firms he would contact by defining its needs.

"They said, 'I need a down-and-dirty construction litigator who can fight this case, and we need a firm that has a bankruptcy lawyer. If there are four jobs they are waiting to get, and they don't get them, they might have to file bankruptcy,'" he explained.

Like law firms, CPA firms are increasingly specializing, which makes it easier for clients to find what they need. Goldstein Schechter Koch partner Dana Kaufman said. He's a CPA and an attorney – albeit not a practicing one. He started as a lawyer, handling estates, only to be enticed by forensic accounting.

Lawyers, who are the biggest source of referrals, feel more comfortable with him because of his legal background. But, there are few professionals who are both attorneys and CPAs because they usually like to become experts in their chosen professions.

Still, there are positives to be realized from having both backgrounds.

"The pure CPA looks at things as black and white, and the law is extremely gray," Kaufman explained. "I can maneuver between both the black and white the accountants want to hear, and the gray the lawyer needs to make a case."

But, specialization isn't enough to beat the competition in today's economy.

As a result, Daszkal brought in a specialist to help him expand his client base. Weston-based **Flashpoint Marketing** provides a list of potential clients to help increase contacts with law firms. Brian Swanson, Flashpoint's principal, said reaching out for the first time is often the hardest part for professionals that are highly skilled in their disciplines, but find it hard to talk about things outside their own work. So, he arranges social mixers and poker nights at law or CPA firms, to which partners from the other firms are invited.

For Christine Alexander Suchyna, director of marketing for Coral Gables-based Goldstein Schechter Koch, the key to referrals is nurturing the relationship after the initial introduction. The first step for Suchyna is making a connection with a law firm's business development or marketing director.

"We each handpick attorneys and accountants that would make sense to refer business to each other," she said. "I organize networking lunches and cocktail hours to help cultivate these relationships. The most important feature of this relationship-building exercise is to not let the networking slip through the cracks after the initial meeting."