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Global Thinking Goes Beyond Location

By [Dawn Wagenaar](#) on November 21, 2008 @ 12:47 pm in [International Business](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

You don't have to practice law abroad to engage in its globalization. Your firm may compete for new and existing work against a foreign firm because the client is international or because the foreign law firm has just opened a branch in your city. Client industries are consolidating, and US firms are experiencing competition from foreign law firms setting up shop in the U.S. or taking on clients that used to be accessible only to U.S. firms. A relationship with a "local" law firm may now include firms just about anywhere in the world depending on the client's ownership structure. Likewise, U.S. law firms are setting up more offices abroad.

With careers in law taking on a global flavor, young associates need to build their knowledge of the global market so that they can understand future business development and practice scope.

For example, if a German firm acquires one of your firm's biggest clients but your firm will continue to handle legal needs for the U.S. subsidiary, how will the relationship change? How can your team proactively position itself as preferred legal counsel? What challenges to the new relationship need to be met?

Even if your primary focus isn't business development, you can still keep these questions in mind. Here are a few other tips.

Learn What You Can About Diverse Business Cultures

Every country views business dealings in different ways. Customs, greetings, work schedules and case timelines, dress codes, food and drink and even ethics vary.

Use your natural online research skills to learn what is acceptable and expected in the legal environments of different countries. This information can come in handy and impress partners when client relationships change or the firm considers expanding abroad.

It also helps to understand some of the legal jargon and precedent-setting cases among your foreign competitors. Trade publications like U.K.-based [Managing Partner](#) ^[1] can give you a taste of what's happening in the legal field abroad.

Leverage Contacts

Do you already have friends in other countries with whom you communicate through online social networking channels? You can expand your network by connecting with young associates in other countries who can give you an inside scoop on what's happening in their fields and in their firms.

Assume that your overseas contacts are just as willing and open to share information as your U.S. colleagues. All you have to do is break the ice and initiate contact. These connections can help you to better understand social and business customs, too.

For international career-building advice, check out the [International Association of Young Lawyers \(AIJA\)](#) ^[2], a bilingual non-profit association devoted to lawyers and inhouse counsel aged 45 and under.

Build Alliances

Chances are your firm belongs to an international alliance or association of similar firms. Find out about the group your firm belongs to and investigate ways you can participate. The group may

have an emerging leaders track, marketing group or other subgroup that is looking for volunteers.

By joining these organizations, you can lead your firm to new opportunities without incurring the expense of opening an office abroad; you'll also position yourself well for other leadership opportunities.

Play To Your Strengths

Thanks to our legal environment, U.S.-based firms will remain the best choice for many clients. State and local law in particular requires attorneys who are entrenched in case precedents and the organization of the courts.

However, your team and firm most likely possess other strengths that foreign-based firms can't match. Knowledge of individual judges, multi-state admissions, the variety or skill-intensiveness of your practice groups, your reputation in a particular industry—all these can be leveraged to enhance your firm's competitiveness.

Take stock of what your firm does best and what skills you could acquire to add to its global footprint. If you become a thought leader in your own career, you will certainly enhance the bottom line of your firm along the way—in any market.

About the Author(s):

Dawn Wagenaar - Dawn Wagenaar is a principal with Ingenuity Marketing Group which provides marketing, training and public relations for attorneys and other professional services firms nationwide. Dawn has spoken at both regional and national LMA functions on marketing strategies.

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[1] Managing Partner: <http://www.mpmagazine.com/>

[2] International Association of Young Lawyers (AIJA): <http://www.aija.org/>

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