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PERSPECTIVE

Knobbe Martens wants to be the world's best IP firm. Maybe it already is

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When Knobbe Martens opened in Orange County 60 years ago, intellectual property law was markedly different.

"Most general practice firms did not do IP work so almost all of our referrals came from those firms back then," said Steven J. Nataupsky, who has been Knobbe Martens' managing partner since 2005.

Now, "many firms have adopted IP practitioners in house, so we get referrals largely based on the quality of work that we do, and our clients talk to their friends or colleagues," Nataupsky said, adding that referrals are far fewer than in the early days.

Since Knobbe Martens opened its doors in 1962 it has consistently been recognized as one of the foremost IP and technology boutiques in the nation, and according to Sabin H. Lee, the firm owes much of its success to the diversity of its client base.

"Every client has different legal issues so we are constantly dealing with complex problems that really involve a high level of brain activity," said Lee, co-chair of Knobbe Martens' medical devices and procedures practice group.

Lee, who is commemorating 25 years with the firm this year, received his bachelor's degree in materials engineering and said that having many other attorneys at the firm who have studied in a wide range of disciplines is an asset.

"We pretty much handle any sort of technology that anybody can think of and so there's always going to be a place for somebody no matter their technical background," explained Lee.

Lee attended UC Berkeley School of Law where he met Sheila N. Swaroop, now co-chair



From left: Steven J. Nataupsky, Sheila N. Swaroop and Sabin H. Lee.
Thomas Kurtz / Special to the Daily Journal

of Knobbe Martens' litigation group, and introduced her to the firm after he worked as a summer associate in 1996.

Swaroop, a registered patent attorney who joined in 2000, spends most of her time on the enforcement side of litigation in state and federal courts as well as specialized courts like the International Trade Commission.

"Our clients are always inventing new things and intellectual property law is constantly changing," said Swaroop. "The federal circuit is very active and issues a lot of decisions that impact our practice. We keep on top of that to be able to advise our clients and that keeps it interesting for us as well."

The firm's lawyers tend to advise on a larger scope of matters as they rise in seniority.

Lee said his "very first client at the firm was a medical device company, and that opened up my eyes to that whole industry."

Lee dedicates about 80% of his time to the practice but never feels

like he's working on the same problem over and over again.

"The patent office is constantly issuing new rules and regulations, so it's our challenge to keep current on that stuff," Lee said. "I do find that it keeps you interested. ... I don't know exactly what I'm going to face every morning when I come into the office."

Swaroop added that when clients meet with Knobbe Martens' attorneys, however, they don't need to get them up to speed because everyone at the firm makes it a priority to understand the latest developments in technology.

"We can talk the talk so we can get right into it with them. I think that's one of our strengths," said Swaroop.

Another benefit of working for Knobbe Martens, said Nataupsky, is the firm's shorter than average partnership track of six years. The firm is invested in helping all its associates become future co-owners of the firm from Day One, he said.

Lee, who has also been with Knobbe Martens for his entire career, said associates are given responsibilities and exposed to business development opportunities and client interactions early on. "We are training our associates to make partner," said Lee.

According to Swaroop, the tradition of encouraging associates from the get-go can be traced back to founding partner Louis J. Knobbe.

"He was a very big proponent of bringing people along to attend a Rotary Club meeting or go see a client, and that custom is something we have tried to continue," reflected Swaroop. "We really encourage our attorneys to go out and represent the firm."

Although he doesn't measure the firm's success by the number of attorneys employed, Nataupsky believes that Knobbe Martens will be even bigger in 10 years because of increasing client demand.

"When I started about 30 or 35 years ago, we had 20 attorneys at most and now we're over 300 attorneys. The proof is in the pudding," said Nataupsky. "There's more advancement now than even during the Industrial Revolution. We're just lucky to be alive and practicing in this time frame and to be able to see the creativity and innovation of our clients."

Knobbe Martens' biggest accomplishment is being able to say it still so closely resembles what it was like in 1962, Nataupsky said.

"I think at one point if we said we wanted to be all things to all people and be a general practice firm, we may not be as successful as we are today," he noted. "We want to be the best IP firm on the planet and we've continued with that goal."

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