



Editorial Opinion

Stay Connected

By Richard L. Seabolt



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A Thai takeout lunch about a year ago changed the trajectory of my thirty-year professional career. It wasn't the food — the Chicken Thai Basil was good, not great. Instead, the catalyst for change was the simple act of staying connected with an old colleague.

For the thirty years since law school I had practiced with a mid-sized San Francisco-based litigation firm. Over those years, the firm that hired me in law school grew and, as my contemporaries and I aged, the firm became “our firm.” We were

proud of our practice, and it was comfortable and collegial. Some of my partners were and are some of my best friends. But over time I became convinced that the legal marketplace had changed. The pendulum had swung — from the 1970s when some corporate clients and their large law firms seemed joined at the hip — to the 1980s, when despite legal press predictions of the demise of the mid-sized firms, those firms flourished because in-house lawyers viewed their role as matching particular outside lawyers with particular types of litigation, regardless of the size of the firm or how many different lawyers and law firms were retained to handle different matters.

But after 2000, it seemed that corporate clients were merging to adapt to the new global economy. Those same corporate clients, as discussed in the “In-House Perspective” Roundtable Discussion, were reducing the number of “preferred provider” law firms in a shift referred to as “convergence.” National firms grew. Unlike the inaccurate predictions of the 1980s, this time the legal press simply reported the trend — San Francisco mid-sized firms were disappearing one-by-one by merging into national firms.

With that background, when my colleague-former partner inquired about my/our interest in exploring a merger with the national firm that

he had joined six years earlier, I was intrigued enough that the casual Thai lunch cascaded into a series of small group meetings between the partners of both firms. Last fall both partnerships approved the merger effective the first of day of 2006. The shift was dramatic — our San Francisco-based firm of 70 lawyers became part of a national firm of 600 lawyers.

While I am optimistic and enthusiastic about the merger because of the opportunities it presents, the real point is that my Thai lunch reinforced in my own mind a bit of advice that I often provide to my teenage sons — “stay connected” with friends. Staying connected with friends and colleagues is valuable for its own sake. We should cherish our friends and colleagues. But my Thai lunch was also a reminder that staying connected can enhance opportunities in ways that can have dramatic, unexpected effects on one's professional career.

The Litigation Section offers many ways to connect with old and

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new colleagues. One is the upcoming April 21-23 Litigation Section's Annual Trial Symposium & Retreat. As e. robert (bob) wallach, the Litigation Section's 2006 Trial Lawyer Hall of Fame award winner, eloquently writes, the weekend at Silverado will be an opportunity to recharge, have some fun, share some camaraderie and "dust off our best skills and share them with others of like dedication." Please stay connected with old and new colleagues and join us at Silverado.

This edition of *California Litigation* also helps us stay connected with another, different group of litigators — in-house litigators. We welcome as readers of this edition of *California Litigation* the 3,000 California in-house lawyer-members

of the Association of Corporate Counsel. (They join those to whom *California Litigation* is regularly distributed — the nearly 10,000 current members of the Litigation Section, as well as all federal and state judges who preside over courts located in California.) This issue has been distributed more broadly because the theme of this issue is "the corporate litigator." Many Litigation Section members regularly represent corporations; others regularly sue corporations — whether in business-versus-business disputes or consumer-versus-business disputes. Usually *California Litigation* explores issues associated with a particular aspect of litigation — such as, experts, discovery, damages or technology. But a large part of this issue

turns the table and explores litigation from the perspective of the clients. In the "In-House Perspective" Roundtable Discussion, the participants discuss key issues that bear on the relationship of in-house counsel to their outside litigators. How do clients select counsel? What is the best strategy for an outside law firm to become a preferred provider of legal services for a particular client? What type of fee arrangements do they use? The opinions and answers vary. But it is helpful to connect with the perspective of the in-house litigator, to understand their problems, and to try to shape one's own practice based on the advice and insights of the very experienced panelists who graciously agreed to participate in the roundtable discussion.



Silverado and Nirvana

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Judges who have combined hundreds of years of experience and excellence are willing to share, without hesitation or limit, the skills, ideas, and insights born of their own experience — success and failure.

Those with whom you sit are not mute observers but forceful questioners, energetic critics, interchanging their own views and experiences with you and the faculty. It is akin to a pure research lab of marvelous dialogue, camaraderie, humor, shared drama. There are no competitors

in this assemblage but colleagues focused upon improving themselves and their profession.

Well, that may not be lasting Nirvana when you return to the pressures of the office but, while in the escape to Silverado it is as close to finding perfection as a lawyer as we have ever been able to achieve. We can understand and apply the requirement that being a lawyer also means finding the time and the will to step into a thriving intellectual environment where we can dust off our best skills and share them with

others of like dedication. We balance out the drudgery and too frequent disappointment of our professional lives. We recharge. We get better. We make more money. We have some fun. We feel like true professionals because we know that, amidst the camaraderie, the elegant dinner in the magnificent winery, there is the on-going current of yet another generation of lawyers who are not looking back with nostalgia but forward with determination to earn the respect of their clients, their peers and themselves.