

California Powerhouse: Latham & Watkins

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James Beaubien
Los Angeles



Michele Johnson
Orange County



Matthew Rawlinson
Silicon Valley



Brett Rosenblatt
San Diego



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Law360, Los Angeles (July 16, 2014, 5:53 PM ET) -- Latham & Watkins LLP is one of the largest law firms in the nation and was the first American law firm to reach \$2 billion in revenue, but its California-based attorneys say the firm's global success is tied directly to its Los Angeles roots.

Latham started in 1934 as an ambitious tax and labor law firm with just three lawyers, and it still operates in teams handling each case, its attorneys say. The only difference is that now those teams are pulled from a worldwide pool of more than 2,000 attorneys in 14 different countries. And with 562 California-based attorneys and these extensive global resources, Latham has earned its spot on Law360's list of California Powerhouses.

"It's a story of what makes Latham strong," Brett Rosenblatt, who heads the law firm's San Diego office, told Law360. "At the end of the day, unlike a lot of our competitors, we really do work as a single firm."

The firm's original Los Angeles office also has its largest concentration of attorneys in the state, though the New York office has surpassed it as the firm's largest. But the location of the firm's professionals is not important, according to its attorneys.

Latham is successful in California — working with clients like Wells Fargo & Co., Bank of America Corp., Apple Inc., Amazon.com Inc. and many others — precisely because the firm isn't California-centric, Rosenblatt said.

"We're able to say, 'This is what we represent and this is the type of exposure we have,'" Rosenblatt said. "Those are the things that differentiate Latham from the pack. We're really proud of that and we work hard to foster that."

The San Diego office opened to gain closer access to some of its life sciences, military, hospitality and technology clients. The office has been in place long before many big-name San Diego companies flourished, so the firm's roots there are deep, Rosenblatt said.

But at any given point, his Southern California attorneys are teaming up with other lawyers as close as Orange County or as far away as Brussels to serve clients, he said.

That the firm can offer the availability of being in a client's hometown while also tapping into those international resources is part of Latham's secret sauce, Rosenblatt said.

"It's one of the things that makes Latham truly special," Rosenblatt said. "You're not going to find another Latham-level firm that has this kind of presence in California, and that gives us a competitive advantage."

The San Diego office is also at the heart of Latham's market-leading environmental law practice, whose work is helping to shape climate change rules for power plant emissions. Latham's environmental law practice was chosen as one of Law360's Practice Groups of the Year in 2013, in part for its work representing Edison Mission Energy in successfully winning a stay of a Clean Air Act rule.

The firm has grown with its clients and work, and seeks to continue doing so, according to James Beaubien, who leads Latham's Los Angeles office.

Latham represented Drexel Burnham Lambert Inc. in the 1980s as its star employee Michael Milken was "basically inventing" the high-yield bond market, Beaubien noted. In 1989, Milken pled guilty to securities violations in connection with an insider trading investigation, and Drexel collapsed into bankruptcy a few months later.

Latham was catapulted into a highly sophisticated realm through its work with Drexel, and emerged relatively unscathed from its implosion, Beaubien said. When Drexel's former employees scattered into other corners of the financial world, they called on Latham for legal work, he said.

"It provided us with new relationships throughout the finance industry," he said.

It also gave the firm a leg up at a time when regional firms were growing into national firms, he said.

"What we're seeing now is additional stratification to truly global firms," Beaubien said. "We've continued to evolve into that type of firm, while retaining very deep, very broad roots in California."

Latham's Los Angeles office has attracted big-name clients including The Walt Disney Co., Mattel Inc., Live Nation Entertainment Inc. and others, and it also has a bevy of startup clients, he said. But he was quick to note that clients aren't assigned to one particular office and that the firm emphasizes a focus on bringing together the best possible team for a client, regardless of where the attorneys reside.

Karen Silverman, who leads the firm's San Francisco office, said the firm's office chiefs sometimes serve as ambassadors for clients, introducing them to attorneys in the firm who might not necessarily reside in the clients' cities.

"This office has many different practices, all of which have regional, national and international dimensions," Silverman said. "It's the nature of the people who are here and what we do."

Silverman notes the particular advantages of working for a firm with global resources when she has a client facing antitrust issues, Silverman said. The San Francisco office deals with many antitrust cases, but those cases are litigated across the nation and beyond, she said.

"Clients come to us with really interesting problems," she said. "To be able to quickly and efficiently address those problems is uplifting. It's fun to be able to solve problems with a broad and deep and fantastic tool set."

Latham wouldn't be able to address clients' issues without a deep bench of talented attorneys, and Beaubien said the California offices are full of legal professionals that fuel global success.

"The thing that really amazes me about our market here is we can attract the very best legal talent into this market, both in terms of students coming out of law school and lateral hires," Beaubien said.

Matt Rawlinson, the head of the firm's Silicon Valley office and a self-professed Latham "lifer," said the firm's ability to seamlessly bring together talent from neighboring California offices and worldwide branches is one of the "forward-looking" elements that make the firm a home.

Latham had to learn how to outfit its services for small-company needs at its outset in Silicon Valley, but it has since grown into a cost-effective option for small companies that could be facing big legal issues as they leap to big-market success, he said.

Staffing at the Silicon Valley office is lean in order to keep costs down, he noted. The firm provides discounted legal services for true startups. And they don't sell the clients services they don't need, he said.

"We try to be excellent lawyers for the startup market but then have the capability for the clients when they get large enough to need it," Rawlinson said. "The firm has learned how to do both of those things."

Michele Johnson, who leads the firm's Orange County office, said part of that flexibility comes not only from being geographically available, but also from making sure the firm's attorneys are experts in their field globally.

One of the Orange County office's biggest clients has been Watson Pharmaceuticals Inc., which is now Actavis PLC, Johnson noted. Watson was a local company based in Southern California that hired Latham to do legal work surrounding its corporate governance before it exploded into world's third-largest generic-drug maker.

When Dublin-headquartered Actavis purchased New York-based Forest Laboratories Inc., Latham's Orange County office worked on the deal, Johnson noted.

"The reason we were able to do that from the Orange County office is our global reach," Johnson said. "The lawyers who are here (in Orange County) are experts in their fields in the world."

That global impact wasn't always in the firm's sights, Beaubien said.

"If you go back 20 years ago, for us to do a cross-border deal, we would have had to partner up with and rely on law firms in those jurisdictions. But now we can cover the globe for the most part," he said. "Clients react very positively to that."

Despite its explosive growth, Latham has stayed true to itself, Beaubien noted. The firm prides itself on a warm, welcoming culture that fosters friendship and teamwork among its partners, rather than competition.

"It's essential to what we do," Beaubien said of the firm's "no 'I' in 'team'" attitude. "I think the clients see it. They see how the petty types of competitions don't get in the way of our work here."