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Musical chairs for firms' public faces

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LOS ANGELES — It all started when communications director Peter Columbus left O'Melveny & Myers for a position at Kaye Scholer this fall.

To fill the opening at O'Melveny, John Buchanan left his job at Heller Ehrman. To fill that slot at Heller, Patrick Bustamante left his post at DLA Piper.

"Clearly there's a domino effect," Buchanan said.

The moves suggest that at a time when firms are pouring millions into branding and other marketing initiatives, PR professionals — who serve as a firm's public face — are increasingly restive. The challenge firms face in hanging on to their PR people mirrors the struggle faced on a wider scale by the marketing departments that PR officials usually report to: Despite rising pay and growing budgets, statistics show that law firm marketing professionals tend toward short stays.

"It is very hard to lose top leadership and continue the momentum of a branding campaign," said Jolene Overbeck, a law firm marketing expert with the Zeughauser Group. "The competition is fierce — virtually every member of a marketing structure in this market is very vulnerable to poaching."

By most accounts, the stints average 18 months to three years, depending upon the level.

Experts attribute the frequent hops to the demand in the marketplace, the climate within the firms, and a belief that a lateral move is the only way to get a sizable salary increase. Within the firm, there are also ten-

sions between marketers and lawyers, many of whom are still in the dark about what the departments do and when they should see results, insiders say.

Since many of the firms are still in the nascent stages of developing a marketing department, the structures tend to be flat, with little room for upward growth, another factor that contributes to frequent departures.

On average, a director position in a marketing department earns \$162,000, with large firms often paying more than \$200,000, according to a 2006 survey from Wisnik Career Enterprises. The chief marketing officer, a position that 34 Am Law 100 firms now have, averages more than \$300,000.

"Usually, to get any significant jump in salary you have to go somewhere else — unless you become so valuable to the firm that they're willing to bump you," O'Melveny's Buchanan said. "There are a lot of carrots out there, and people do move for money."

The work can also take a frenzied pace with large firms having global offices open around the clock. It's enough to burn out the marketing teams.

"Moving to a new firm gives you a fresh start — you're reinvigorated," Buchanan said.

When Scott DeVries took the managing partner post at Nossaman Guthner Knox & Elliott in 2000, he inherited a marketing director who left shortly thereafter to go to a major firm — something that got him thinking about how to hold onto good people.

"If people are moving within two to three years, they're moving just when they're hitting their stride," he said. "We had a track record of grooming excellent marketing peo-

ple who went on to what they thought were greener pastures."

Under his leadership, the firm consciously tried to include marketing directors in strategic meetings, sitting alongside the firm's top lawyers. DeVries gave the directors more authority, asking them to lead projects such as upgrading the firm's Web site. And the firm has paid careful attention to keeping their pay competitive.

"The way in which we treat them, the responsibilities we give them, and the compensation packages seem to be working," DeVries said, adding that the two directors hired under his charge are still at the firm.

For Thelen Reid & Priest, the function was important enough for Chairman Stephen O'Neal to lead efforts to recruit a marketing officer and public relations director more than a year ago.

"I have long been a believer in obtaining the most sophisticated marketing and PR systems available," said O'Neal. In searching for a marketing officer, O'Neal said he looked outside law firms "because the pool of sophisticated marketing professionals is much larger" if you don't limit yourself.

Their functions have been integral to Thelen as it recently merged with Brown Raysman Millstein Felder & Steiner. Public relations and law firm management worked closely to launch an internal blog with merger updates.

The marketing department at Luce, Forward, Hamilton & Scripps has taken on increased importance as the firm tries to distinguish its name and story for the community and clients, said Managing Partner Robert Bell. They've expanded the public relations job to include more involvement in the com-

munity, including participation in philanthropic events.

Keeping a consistent team is important because those professionals have a deeper understanding of what they're trying to convey for the firm, he said. The firm gives the marketing director a seat at the table similar to a vice president, he said.

"What people react positively to is having the support of the firm, having the firm behind them," he said.

But the burden isn't only on firm management. To show their worth to firms, marketing professionals have to be clear about what they're going to accomplish and set clear timelines, said Wisnik's Jennifer Johnson.

"When you're making a lot of money as a non-fee earner, you are essentially overhead, so you have to show them what you're doing," she said.

And, she added, it's important for management to trust their marketing advisers. Those who have a close relationship with the chairman or managing partner are the most successful.

Melissa Bailey, client relations manager for the Los Angeles office of Fulbright & Jaworski and the incoming president of the Legal Marketing Association of Los Angeles, said some law firms "don't see marketing as essential," adding that "people think a chimpanzee could do our job."

As firms empower chief marketing

officers, they're pushing into areas like international communications and extending the brand through event sponsorship and other community involvement, said the Zeughauser Group's Overbeck.

But no matter how successful those efforts are, they hinge on continuity, she said.

"Branding is effective when it's smart, but it's got to be communicated consistently over the long haul," Overbeck said. "If you lost someone at the heart of it, that would be a big hole."

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