

Volume 17 Issue 4
November 2009



pm

professional marketing

The worldwide journal for marketing professional services from the PM Forum

**“I don’t think we
can be called a
Bermuda law firm
anymore”**

Ross Webber
Conyers Dill & Pearman

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Pick your clients before
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Offshore law firm Conyers Dill & Pearman has been going more than 80 years but the last two have been the most extraordinary. Marketing head Ross Webber talks to Neasa MacErlean.

For most of its 82 years, Conyers Dill & Pearman had been a Bermuda law firm. But that gradually changed in the last three decades as the firm opened one office after another abroad. With last month's opening party for the office in Mauritius, Conyers is an international 11-office, 11-country firm. "I don't think we can be called a Bermuda law firm anymore," says Ross Webber with understatement. Quite right. It would be a bit like calling the Queen a rich lady who lives in London.

Offshore law firms are particularly interesting at the moment because they are seriously having to adapt themselves in order to survive. The credit crunch and the world economic crisis have forced the US and other governments to launch massive bailout and fiscal stimulus initiatives, with the consequence that they are faced now with

pushing up domestic taxes unless they can find cash from elsewhere. They have decided together to try to make offshore tax bases more transparent in the belief that this will substantially increase their tax take. The UK Treasury, for example, estimates it will get £1 billion in unpaid back taxes through a disclosure agreement it signed this summer with Liechtenstein (not a jurisdiction in which Conyers has a presence).

Bermuda, home to over 4,500 captive insurers, is the world's second most important base (after the US) for this specialist part of the insurance world. So, whatever happens on tax transparency issues, this specialism will probably survive for many years to come. But offshore firms are clearly being wise in hedging their bets and diversifying their own specialisms and client markets.

Conyers has built a strategy in recent years to expand into the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) emerging markets. "We cannot rely on the developed markets of New York and London to be the cash cows forever," says Bermuda-born, UK-educated Webber. Conyers is fulfilling its BRIC plan to the letter: It opened in Brazil (São Paulo) in May this year; Russia (Moscow) last year; India (via Mauritius) in June this year and China (Hong Kong) in 1985. It is currently restricted from opening on Indian territory by Indian government rules. In mainland China it is awaiting Chinese government clearance before looking at opening in Shanghai and Beijing. Other offices are planned in order to expand upon the BRIC strategy but the firm prefers not to disclose the precise locations just yet.

Somewhat surprisingly, when Webber was asked what marketing achievements he would highlight most from the last couple of years

he did not mention the huge amount of work he and his team have done to help open these new offices and to attract new clients from these markets. Instead, he takes it as a given that his six-person team will work flat-out to support the aims of the 40-partner, 150-lawyer, 600-personnel strong firm.

But each opening has involved a huge amount of work. Conyers chairman John Collis certainly recognises the necessity of the marketing role. "We might be relatively large as a business in Bermuda, almost a household name," says Collis. "But it is very important that people in other corners of the world be made aware, when they

marketing for Avon Cosmetics and Black & Decker in the UK and also for ACE, AIG and the Bermuda International Business Association) has become used to marketing in very different environments. When helping open the Moscow office, he learnt that two flowers are associated with bereavement there and so removed that idea from an advertisement campaign they were planning to run. When dealing with Japanese contacts (a very important market for the firm, although it has no Tokyo office yet), he is used to exchanging business cards with far more solemnity and study than in the US where it would be odd to admire the font of a card one had just been given.

Chairman John Collis recognises the necessity of marketing: "It is important that people in other corners of the world be made aware, when they need services, that Conyers provides them."

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As well as the challenge of launching a new practice, there has also been the more recent challenge of working in a downturn. Collis describes the economic backdrop to the São Paulo launch in May 2009: "We opened the office and then a global credit crunch kicked in. We took that as an opportunity to spend more time marketing, rather than being flooded with business. So what we did was get people in front of people, and people had a little bit more time to talk to us."

In all of Conyers' markets, the firm spends a lot of time marketing

One of Webber's proudest achievements is establishing the 'really, really tight, really, really focused' two hour annual seminar on offshore law staged in New York each October. Although it is followed by a reception, this brief, intense event is clearly designed to fit into the frenetic New York business culture. The guests clearly like it, and have grown in number from 60 to 150 in the eight years since Webber first started it. He points to *The American Lawyer's* description of it as "one of its favourite events on the NY legal social calendar" as a great accolade.

Clearly not used to blowing his own trumpet, Webber cites acco-

No longer a Bermuda firm

to the local law firms through which it receives much of its business.

Its Moscow launch is a good example of how it handles openings in general. There was a press launch at the Pushkin Café, a top restaurant, at which the Russian legal press was well-represented. "I had to learn some Russian myself," says Webber. "I always make the effort to say a few words in the domestic language." He addresses each of these press conferences around the world and finds that people appreciate such efforts to be in harmony with the local culture.

Although Webber travels a lot, the marketing in each country is effectively implemented by the managing partner there and that person's team. Webber develops a marketing plan with them and helps them with the marketing deliverables. For instance, there are brochures on the firm on the Conyers website in Russian, Japanese and Chinese. "The managing partners of the international offices are very hands on," he says. "We have a very collaborative process." In each new country, the firm does a lot of press work. This identification of "important journalists in all these markets" is highlighted by Collis as one of the biggest contributions the marketing team is making at the moment.

In his eight years at the firm, Webber (who previously worked in

lades such as *The American Lawyer* comment as evidence of his department's success rather than making any great claims himself. So he also points proudly to Conyers' winning of *The Lawyer's* Offshore Law Firm of the Year Award in June this year and to the fact of his own survival in the post for eight years now. "The average life span is three years," he says. He also highlights the pioneering success of the firm – the first of the "offshore magic circle" of five firms to "offer multi-jurisdictional law", open outside its own territory (in Guernsey in 1982) and to open in Hong Kong, Russia and São Paulo. "Competitors are all following our model," he says.

What should in future go down as one of his successes is a rebranding of the firm – including a full new corporate identity and website overhaul – due for the first quarter of 2010. The firm is not skimping on the process, and has engaged Ogilvy and Mather as advisers. "The time is right," says Webber. "We have grown out of our Bermuda shell and into an international brand." He does not want to reveal all yet but adds: "It's much more than just the look and the feel. It's a clarification of who we are, where we are going and how we present ourselves. Look out for it." We will.