

Sheppard Mullin Chair Keeps Firm Happy, Growing

By DOUG SHERWIN



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Guy Halgren
Partner
Sheppard Mullin Richter
& Hampton LLP

It was a banner year for the San Diego offices of the law firm Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton LLP.

The firm acquired a bevy of talented lateral partners, including noted bankruptcy attorney Margaret Mann and stellar corporate lawyers Kirt Shuldberg, Bob Copeland, Jamie Mercer and Michael Umansky.

Sheppard Mullin also increased its head count at the San Diego and Del Mar offices

by 10 percent. And, more importantly, the firm avoided making any layoffs in '08.

At the forefront of Sheppard Mullin's robust business is Guy Halgren, chairman of the firm's executive committee.

"He's just a great manager with vision, which is probably something that is said of a lot of leaders, but it really applies in Guy's position," said Dana Dunwoody, managing partner of Sheppard Mullin's San Diego offices.

"To be able to get quality candidates coming in here because of management and firm structure they can believe in, in times when firms seem to be so unstable -- a lot has to be attributed to Guy's leadership and the firm."

Halgren said the key is making sure the firm is a fun place to work while maintaining the gains in size and profitability.

The firm employs a rigorous recruiting process. Potential newcomers meet with about 100 of the firm's 200 partners to get a good feel for what the firm's about. A candidate's character is considered first before the firm looks at his or her practice, according to Halgren.

"It's all about the people," he said. "It's just about acquiring good people (from the outside) and growing good people internally. I think laterals see this as a good place to work."

The chairman sees his job like that of a football coach. He gets the best players, puts them in a position to win and then lets them do the rest.

"We don't micromanage," Halgren said. "We give lots of leeway to partners to see as they do fit."

Dunwoody said Sheppard Mullin's San Diego offices contain a "happy group of partners" and almost non-existent debt, both of which can be attributed to Halgren.

"Healthy firms don't happen by accident," Dunwoody said. "I think that's Guy's greatest contribution."

"He's a brilliant lawyer," Dunwoody added. "He is nationally recognized in labor and wage-and-hour class actions. As a practitioner, he's very well known."

Dunwoody said Halgren has been instrumental in creating practice areas and expanding the firm's smaller ones. Most impressive in Halgren's seven and a half years as chairman is the formation and growth of the firm's entertainment and media group. According to Dunwoody, it's a premier practice group, representing all of the major studios and other entertainment interests in New York and Los Angeles.

The firm's intellectual property practice has expanded substantially as well, Dunwoody said, in both the technology and life sciences sectors.

Sheppard Mullin has opened seven offices under Halgren's leadership, including the one in Del Mar and one in Shanghai.

Halgren said the firm's long-term goal is to be more competitive in the marketplace and more attractive to legal talent.

Halgren is motivated by the fact that "1,000 families rely on the firm for their livelihoods, and that weighs on me heavily. I can't afford to foul it up."

In addition to the growth, Sheppard Mullin's associate attrition is at its lowest level in a decade. "We're keeping the firm together through tough economic times," Halgren said. "The partners make less money in the short run by keeping the whole enterprise together, but we know in the long run, that's going to make us strong."