THE 2012 MIDSIZE HOT LIST

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AXINN, VELTROP & HARKRIDER

Now in its 15th year, Axinn, Veltrop & Harkrider has established itself as a serious player in the antitrust and intellectual property fields. Operating from offices in New York, Washington and Hartford, Conn., the firm has not significantly changed its headcount since 2010 — 55 then, compared with 55 now. Still, the firm drew business from big names during 2011, especially within the technology and pharmaceutical industries.

For example, Google Inc. hired partners Michael Keeley and John Harkrider to protect confidential business data provided to the U.S. Department of Justice during its investigation of AT&T Inc.'s proposed acquisition of T-Mobile USA Inc. Google turned over the information in response to a government demand, and in September the Axinn Veltrop team demanded the right to review any documents that the government might consider releasing publicly. The motion is pending.

It was not the first time Google sought the firm's counsel. Axinn Veltrop guided the company through the Justice Department's April 2011 approval of its acquisition of ITA Software Inc. And the firm represented Google in its $12.5 billion acquisition of Motorola Mobility Inc., which faced intense scrutiny from both U.S. and European antitrust officials.

Elsewhere, the firm represented French businessman Bernard Tapie during negotiations to buy Full Tilt Poker Ltd. for $80 million after the government seized the alleged Ponzi scheme. Partner Behnam Dayanim handled the assignment. The two parties signed an initial acquisition agreement in September 2011, contingent on a resolution of the accusations against the company.

Pharmaceutical companies are regular clients. Axinn attorneys replaced a firm that had been working on an intellectual property dispute between Pfizer Inc. and Actavis Group for eight years. Retained by Actavis roughly 18 months before trial, a team led by partner Francis Morrison reached a settlement two weeks into the trial after having secured the exclusion of several Pfizer expert witnesses.

Not all was smooth sailing in 2011. In January, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit rejected the firm's argument on behalf of Omnicare Inc. that UnitedHealth Group Inc. and PacifiCare Health Systems Inc. had conspired when crafting their merger to fix prices. The court found no substantial evidence of collusion to justify thwarting the merger. — Rob Stigile

BEVERIDGE & DIAMOND

See feature, "If it's a dirty job, they'll handle it".

CARTER LEDYARD & MILBURN

Operating out of just three offices — two in New York and one in Washington — Carter Ledyard & Milburn has become a serious player in the international legal scene without assuming the financial burden of regional offices. The firm leverages its leadership roles in two international legal networks to compete with large international firms while retaining that small-firm feel.

In fact, it actually has been shedding attorneys, losing three last year and 16 since 2009; the total now is 100.

One way in which Carter Ledyard sets itself apart is with its Gateway to America program, through which it provides all the legal services necessary for foreign corporations to set up shop stateside. The program aims to fill the gap between smaller firms that lack practice diversity and larger, more impersonal firms — something of a midsize law firm for foreign midsize companies, particularly those from Canada, Israel and the United Kingdom.
The firm is well known for its art law practice. One recent case involved a dispute between artist Robert Indiana, creator of the iconic "LOVE" image used in statuary and greeting cards, and a business partner. The partner, John Gilbert, persuaded Indiana to create a version using the Sanskrit word, "Prem," in Sanskrit script, but then tried to pass off a version featuring the word spelled out in English letters. Gilbert claimed Indiana had contractually OK'd the alteration, but U.S. District Judge Katherine Forrest said that assertion required a "Grand Canyon-like leap that cannot be made."

Carter Ledyard found a way for The Ayco Co. L.P. to defeat California's strong policy against employee noncompete clauses. The firm crafted Ayco's employment contracts to specify that New York law would govern even workers located in other states. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit affirmed the language last year.

The firm maintains a competitive summer-associate program, which satisfies the majority of its staffing needs. Additionally, it participates in a number of programs designed to increase its minority hiring numbers, including the Thurgood Marshall Summer Law Internship Program. Sponsored by the New York City Bar Association, the paid internship program places high school students at law firms and favors minority students.

The firm was able to turn a dispute involving the extension of New York City's subway service on the west side of Manhattan to all parties' advantage — at the same time setting a precedent governing the valuation of properties gained through eminent domain. In the end, the city acquired the easements it needed for the subway project and the property owner preserved its right to construct an apartment building in the area. — Rob Stigile

DAVIS & GILBERT

See feature, "When it comes to marketing, they go way back"

FARELLA BRAUN + MARTELL

See feature, "Embrace of the new turns out to be good for business"

HARTER SECREST & EMERY

In the past few years, Harter Secrest & Emery has transformed from a regional New York state firm to a national player. From 2005 to 2012, the firm grew from 90 attorneys to approximately 140 — a rate of 56 percent.

At the same time, the law firm capitalized on its ability to offer quality legal services at a lower price than its big-city competitors.

"Over the last five to seven years, we've made a transition from a regional firm to a firm with a sophisticated national practice," said managing partner Maureen Alston.

"As clients continue to see the high level of service, the good value and a great legal product, we see our relationships grow."

The firm, with offices in regional centers in New York state — Albany, Buffalo and Rochester — and in Naples, Fla., keeps cost low. "We are competing with firms in Philly and Boston and D.C., but we are paying rent in Albany and Rochester," said Craig Wittlin, a corporate partner.

Thanks to advances in teleconferencing and related technology, "clients don't need you to have bricks and mortar in the same city to be their lawyers," Alston said.

The firm has found a niche largely within practices including traditional labor, executive compensation and immigration. The employee-benefits practice has more than 20 lawyers, making it one of the largest in the Northeast, she said.

Last year, Harter Secrest represented the owners of the National Hockey League's Buffalo Sabres in the sale of the team for a reported $189 million. During the negotiations, the firm had to navigate public concerns that a new owner might move the team. Taking the lead were partners William Kreienberg and Tyler Savage.

"After Tom Golisano purchased the team and really did a great job turning it around, it was important to find a buyer that was committed to the Buffalo area," Kreienberg said. "It was important for our ownership group that we find the right buyer."

The firm handled the $525 million acquisition of seven hospitals in the vicinity of Knoxville, Tenn., by its client Health Management Associates. Wittlin served as lead partner on the transaction.

"It was an exciting and very big transaction that had a lot of wrinkles and assets," he said. "For a deal that size, there are a lot of moving parts at any given time."

The firm had to negotiate with municipalities that served as landlords to the facilities and calm public fears attending the move. — Matthew Huisman

HOLLINGSWORTH
In 1982, Joe Hollingsworth opened a complex litigation shop in Washington aimed at taking cases corporate clients couldn't or didn't want to handle in-house. Thirty years later, the firm has grown to include 65 attorneys — big enough to defend clients like Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corp. in national mass tort litigation, but still small enough to do it without big-firm bureaucracy.

"We don't have a lot of people entering and then exiting big-time cases willy-nilly," Hollingsworth said.

The firm has a long history of representing pharmaceutical companies in mass products liability litigation. Most recently, Hollingsworth attorneys defended Novartis A.G. in federal and state court cases nationwide related to Aredia and Zometa, drugs prescribed to treat pain and prevent bone-related injuries in cancer patients.

In August, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit affirmed a trial judge's exclusion of the plaintiffs' doctors as experts regarding the link between the drugs and osteonecrosis, or decay, of the jawbone.

Challenging plaintiffs' scientific experts during Daubert hearings is an area of expertise for the firm, according to partner Rebecca Womeldorf. "The firm maintains a network of experts who can present a client's side and "help us to really take apart, brick by brick, the plaintiffs' scientific allegations," she said.

The firm helped secure another Aredia and Zometa verdict in May, in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York. Womeldorf said the firm set the stage for a favorable judgment early on by arguing to limit or exclude testimony from several experts proposed by plaintiffs.

Although 2011 was a big year for pharmaceuticals work, Hollingsworth's practices span the gamut, from government contracts to toxic torts.

The firm tries to keep costs down by staffing cases "precisely," Womeldorf said. She recently handled a case before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit on behalf of General Electric Co. with just one senior associate (who subsequently made partner).

Other strategies include shopping around for third-party vendors for work like electronic discovery, instead of taking a one-size-fits-all-clients approach to whom they use, she said. According to Hollingsworth, the firm has offered alternative fee arrangements including a combined rate for groups of attorneys with different skill levels. "We try to work hard with our client on those things," he said.

While cost efficiency is important, Womeldorf said, clients stick with the firm because of its record of winning at trial and on appeal. "Having been with folks...through high-stakes litigation, that is a big source of the bond between us and the client." — Zoe Tillman

JEFFER MANGELS BUTLER & MITCHELL

Here is Jeffer, Mangels, Butler & Mitchell's secret of success: Stay regional, target only profitable niches and avoid debt like the plague. "We run our business responsibly, and support a cadre of first-rate, forward-thinking lawyers who care about their clients, each other and the firm," said Bruce Jeffer, managing partner of the Los Angeles-based firm.

He pointed to "thriving niche practices" in areas including hospitality, mining, entertainment and sports that tend to stay mainly within California state lines.

"We do not run our business based on cash flow, borrowing from our future earnings to pay for bonuses and other expenses, as many firms do," Jeffer said. "We have no debt. We have one of the best realization rates in the industry. Our practice is diversified. And we grow strategically — not just for growth's sake."

The 125-attorney firm points to successful statewide practices in trusts and estates, creditors' rights and government and land use. Nationally, the firm competes in Americans With Disabilities Act compliance and defense; labor and employment; and intellectual property litigation.

Jeffer Mangels made news last year in its primary global business — deals involving hotels and their related properties. Last July, it opened a global hospitality real estate practice focused solely on enabling Chinese investment in the United States.

The firm has been actively involved in the hotel property market since tourism collapsed during the recession, and opened 2011 with an attention-getting $90 million sale of the Los Angeles Sheraton Universal Hotel to China-based Shenzhen New World Group Co. The 451-room hotel, overlooking Universal City, was in receivership at the time. The firm also arranged a $20 million Chinese investment in the W Hotel and Residences Hollywood in July 2011.

The firm has done nationwide work in hotel properties, as well. The city of Dallas hired Jeffer Mangels to handle the request-for-proposal process for prospective operators of a large convention center and hotel that opened last year. In addition, the firm helped write the agreement governing the tax requirements for the project, which was financed with tax-exempt bonds.

Warren Ernst, senior executive assistant city attorney for Dallas, said that Jeffer Mangels "made a very complex component of the project go efficiently, while assuring the city's leaders and managers that the city's interests were being very well protected. JMBM was critical in providing both legal and practical business advice throughout the process." — Lisa Holton

KANE RUSSELL COLEMAN & LOGAN

Deep in the heart of Texas, two of Kane Russell Coleman & Logan's lawyers are closing transactions for their clients speaking entirely in Mandarin and Cantonese. The ability to be a one-stop shop for companies doing transactions in the Chinese market is merely one way in which the 80-lawyer Dallas firm has differentiated itself.

It also has developed an unusually large bankruptcy practice for a firm its size, last year representing major creditors including golf equipment manufacturer Callaway Golf Co. and the Motor & Equipment Manufacturers Association. Kane Russell has 11 attorneys working on all manner of bankruptcies, including as official counsel to unsecured creditors in 35 cases across 15 states; its attorneys also have experience with clients at all levels, from prebankruptcy representation and debt restructuring all the way through trials.

The firm has added seasoned attorneys to bolster its national large-loss insurance subrogation practice and a trial team that handles complex claims for many of the world’s leading insurance and reinsurance companies. The 20-year-old firm has grown by 30 percent since 2008, while competitors shrank or were absorbed in mergers. A single equity partner has left the firm since the firm started.

Kane Russell last year represented businesses in a number of major deals, including Trammell Crow Co.’s $82 million acquisition, development and leasing of a shopping center in Dallas and TransAtlantic Petroleum Ltd.’s purchase of $150 million in natural gas assets in Turkey, including the simultaneous resale of a $50 million slice to third parties.

As for the China practice, it features lawyers with law degrees in both the United States and China, which allows clients to avoid hiring separate American and Chinese law firms, making business deals more efficient and cheaper.

The firm has gotten ahead by staying put, founding partner Raymond Kane said — remaining in its Dallas headquarters for 17 years, rather than moving to a shiny new building as many competitors have done. That means paying rent at about half the rate.

The firm's billing rates are similar to those charged by other midsize firms, but it offers the "same level of sophistication" as larger competitors, according to Kane.

And the low overhead allows Kane Russell to offer an aggressive compensation system to bring in entrepreneurial lawyers.

Instead of spending money on things that do not bring value to the clients, like snazzy offices, Kane said "We sell the quality of service." — Todd Ruger

KEATING MUETHING & KLEKAMP

Founded in 1954, 100-attorney Keating Muething & Kekamp specializes in complex, multimillion-dollar transnational corporate transactions. The Cincinnati-based firm has achieved national recognition for its strength in venture-capital law, copyright law, land use and zoning. Other areas of expertise include banking and finance, bankruptcy and restructuring.

The firm also boasts public finance expertise — notably in its new-markets tax credit practice, which recently closed an $84 million transaction for U Square LLC to finance a major redevelopment including offices, retail, hotels and apartments near the University of Cincinnati.

"We don't stray into areas where we don't have the talent and expertise to serve our clients well," said managing partner Paul Muething. "Focusing on the practice areas we do best at creates value for our clients and is attractive to prospective clients. Our goal is to provide great service and high-quality legal work at competitive rates, and we do that very well."

In the area of economic development and government incentives, Keating Muething negotiated deals during the fiscal year ending on Sept. 30, 2011, that created 3,500 new jobs and raised $500 million in capital across 13 states. Partners F. Mark Reuter and William Keating Jr. represented Kendle International Inc. in its merger with INC Research LLC, a deal worth $375 million. The firm advised Multi-Color Corp. in its acquisition of York Label Group, with the combined company projected to be the largest product-label company in the United States and the fastest growing globally. The lead partners were Keating and Michael Moeddel.

In a significant real estate deal, Keating Muething served as Ohio counsel on a $450 million financing for SunCoke Energy Inc., the largest independent metallurgical coke producer in the Americas, attending its spinoff from Sunoco Inc. Partner Kenneth Kreider and Gregory Haverkamp, president of firm subsidiary Riverbend Commercial Title Agency, served as project leaders. The firm closed a $28 million transaction for Rock Ohio Caesars LLC, having handled public finance and real estate work involved in developing the Horsehoe Casino in downtown Cincinnati.

In a case it lost, Keating Muething filed claims on behalf of Paid Search Engine Tools LLC, alleging that pay-per-click search engines of Yahoo! Inc., Google Inc. and Microsoft Corp. infringed their patent. A district court granted summary judgment on some claims, and a federal appeals court affirmed. Partners W. Jeffrey Sefton and Gregory Utter worked with co-counsel from Wood Herron & Evans. — Roger Adler

MITCHELL SILBERBERG & KNUPP

Established in 1908, this full-service entertainment firm has had its finger on Hollywood's pulse since the 1920s. It knows all about copyright law and e-commerce law, helping to develop the field in the courtroom and by lobbying. Mitchell Silberberg is a founding member of the Copyright Alliance Legal Advisory Board; was lead counsel in groundbreaking litigation against Napster and Grokster; and has been active against online piracy originating in China.
Mitchell Silberberg’s labor and employment department represents the entertainment industry in major arbitrations. Its past successes include its defense of Warner Brothers Television Production in a wrongful-termination and harassment suit filed by a Friends writer’s assistant over ribald language in production offices.

Partner Adam Levin at the moment represents ABC and Desperate Housewives executive producer Marc Cherry against battery and wrongful termination claims brought by actress Nicollette Sheridan (the case resulted in a mistrial in March).

The firm’s charitable sector practice group provides counsel to tax-exempt organizations, as well.

In one of several music-related achievements last year, partner Eric Schwartz lived up to his reputation as the go-to lawyer for music preservation — he advised Universal Music Group Inc. regarding the storage and preservation of its entire master collection, and in the donation of more than 200,000 recordings to the Library of Congress.

Meanwhile, a content site that encourages users to post videos containing copyrighted musical compositions and recordings, including “lip-synch” videos, is at the core of ongoing litigation in Capitol Records LLC v. Vimeo LLC. Christine LePera is lead counsel for 12 affiliated record and music publishing companies against Internet Web site Vimeo, going up against Todd Anten of Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan.

Of course, one can’t win them all. Mitchell Silberberg’s Karin Pagnanelli had to settle on behalf of Sony Corp. in massive copyright infringement litigation brought by Solid Oak Software Inc. over its Cybersitter Web filters. Among the defendants was China. Sony settled after a trial judge denied its motion to dismiss based on forum non conveniens — the doctrine that the lawsuit should not be heard in the United States but in China’s courts, if at all. The judge has ordered three Chinese companies to stand trial in the United States. — Roger Adler

MORVILLO, ABRAMOWITZ, GRAND, IASON, ANELLO & BOHRER

Since 1973, Morvillo, Abramowitz, Grand, Iason, Anello & Bohrer has focused on regulatory matters, white-collar defense, securities enforcement and litigation, and sophisticated business disputes. Pre-indictment advocacy, litigation-avoidance counsel and internal investigations for clients form a substantial part of the firm’s practice.

Recent Morvillo Abramowitz cases centered on insider trading, the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act, stock-options backdating, tax shelters and tax fraud. The firm qualifies literally as lawyers’ lawyers — it represents attorneys, accountants and physicians accused of misconduct. Several of its 53 attorneys have served as prosecutors and senior government advisers. Although based in New York, Morvillo Abramowitz maintains an additional office in Washington.

"We maintain a collegial, cooperative, nonhierarchical atmosphere which produces the highest quality work product that in our view exceeds the work done at other firms, large and small," said principal Elkan Abramowitz. "We have been able to attract the cream of the crop of available associate talent who come to us because they want to be part of this ethos, which is not duplicated in any other private firm of which I am aware."

Among its 2011 highlights, the firm achieved complete dismissal of U.S. Securities Exchange Commission charges against Afshin Mohebbi, former president and chief operating officer of Qwest Communications Inc. Mohebbi and others had allegedly overstated revenue and failed to disclose Qwest’s reliance on sales of indefeasible rights of use. Principal Paul Grand and associate Jasmine Juteau successfully argued that Mohebbi was innocent of misconduct and that the government failed to demonstrate his role in Qwest’s failure to disclose revenue details.

Principal Lisa Prager and associate Lara Covington represented Israel Weisler, an executive accused of having bribed African officials to win armor, weapons and military-gear contracts. The case ensnared the largest number of prosecuted individuals (22) since the Department of Justice began enforcing the FCPA, but the judge declared a mistrial in July and the action was tossed in early 2012. — Roger Adler

NOVAK DRUCE + QUIGG

See feature, "Well prepped for a brave new world"

OLSHAN GRUNDMAN FROM ROSENZWEIG & WOLOSKY

Something is bringing clients and lawyers to Olshan Grundman From Rosenzweig & Wolosky and keeping them there. According to name partner Robert Frome, it’s the New York firm’s culture.

Oshlan is a "friendly, supportive place," Frome said, where 80 lawyers work together to help the firm’s clients handle their corporate legal matters. The lawyers, about 50 of them associate, work in 11 practice areas, including civil litigation, intellectual property, bankruptcy and transactions. The firm maintains a branch office in Newark, N.J.

"We do have a good culture for a law firm," Frome said. "That’s why clients stay here. That’s why lawyers stay here."

The firm last year claimed major victories on behalf of clients including Atari S.A. Olshan represented the video game maker in a dispute with Hasbro Inc. over licensing of the toy maker’s Dungeons & Dragons brand. In a settlement reached in August, Atari
ceded to Hasbro the digital licensing rights for Dungeons & Dragons but retained rights to create and market games under the brand. Partners Kyle Bisceglie and Herbert Ross Jr. were lead counsel for Atari.

O’Melveny & Myers partner James “Bo” Pearl, who represented Hasbro, said Olshan represented Atari well. “They stuck to their guns,” Pearl said. “But they were always professional.”


The court dismissed the complaint in 2010. Aris appealed, but an intermediate state appellate court affirmed the lower court’s decision last November. Ross and Olshan partner Thomas Fleming were also lead counsel in that case.

Also in 2011, Olshan launched practices in advertising, marketing and promotions, as well as in representing activist investors. The advertising practice formed after Olshan added lawyers from The Lustgarten Firm. The firm’s corporate practice previously handled activist matters. Lawyers in the activist practice, which focuses on contested director elections, have assisted in obtaining board representation at more than 500 companies, according to the firm.

Olshan is in “very good shape” financially, Frome said. “We’re doing great,” he said. — Andrew Ramonas

PIERCE ATWOOD

Pierce Atwood grew up alongside the paper companies of Maine. That meant building a strong natural resources and environmental practice and then expanding from there to meet client demand. Today the firm is known for its energy, intellectual property, privacy and data-security practices — and for its expanding presence.

“We think of ourselves as a New England regional firm that has some national and international practices,” said managing partner Gloria Pinza.

The firm has seven offices — Portland and Augusta, Maine; Boston; Portsmouth, N.H.; Providence, R.I.; Washington; and Stockholm, Sweden. Portland is the largest. Keeping most of its lawyers in Maine makes for a lower cost structure, Pinza said.

“We’ve expanded our footprint, and we want to make sure that our client base remains robust,” Pinza said. “Having a large footprint helps our value proposition, because we work across offices.”

Pierce Atwood shares those economies with clients including Central Maine Power Co. and the state of California. The firm does international energy work for the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The Washington office primarily serves the needs of energy clients, backed up by attorneys throughout its other offices. Pierce Atwood attorneys in Washington are experienced in handling matters before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

“We have a lot of clients that are really all over the place,” Pinza said. “It’s becoming more and more attractive to national companies as they go through the downturn.”

The firm has seen growth in its complex litigation practice and midmarket mergers and acquisitions practice, Pinza said.

Last year, Pierce Atwood represented Portsmouth-based investment company Cate Street Capital Inc. in its acquisition of two pulp and paper mills owned by Katahdin Paper Co. in Millinocket and East Millinocket, Maine.

The attorneys on both sides had to navigate the tax finance strategies and environmental liabilities, among other issues. The completion of the transaction jump-started the shuttered mills, allowing 250 workers to start earning paychecks again.

Eric Stauffer, a partner at Portland-based Preti, Flaherty, Beliveau & Pachios who represented Katahdin Paper in the transaction, said the Pierce Atwood team members were professional and courteous throughout negotiations.

“There were a number of problems to solve,” Stauffer said. “We were able to work together to overcome those through an amicable process, even though the parties had a lot of issues to solve.” — Matthew Huisman

PORTER HEDGES

See feature, “Focus on the energy sector pays off.”

SPILMAN THOMAS & BATTLE

Founded in 1864 in Charleston, W.Va., Spilman Thomas & Battle counts Abraham Lincoln as one of its earliest clients. “Our founders were President Lincoln’s land lawyers,” said Eric Iskra, member in charge of client relations.

Today, the firm still provides boots on the ground in West Virginia with a “strike force” approach to litigation featuring faster assessment of cases so that clients can decide whether they want to go with an alternative resolution or a jury trial. “It’s focused on
bet-the-company litigation matters," Iskra said. In most cases, the firm does its investigation and makes a recommendation within 90 days.

According to Iskra, the 144-attorney firm has established "a solid niche in our region" through its team approach to litigation — an approach it calls "The Battle Group." The reach of its energy practice alone has made it an attractive local firm for national companies with matters pending in Spilman's coverage area, he said. The firm has been able to recruit well, thanks to the lower cost of living and the challenging work opportunities Spilman offers.

The firm charges on average 30 percent less than comparable national firms — due in part to the fact that its six branch offices are located in smaller cities including Harrisburg, Pa.; Roanoke, Va.; and Winston-Salem, N.C. It is also willing to work with alternative fee arrangements.

The care and nurturing of associates is considered of critical importance. The firm provides regular group instruction plus individual mentoring. The firm claimed a 100 percent associate retention rate during 2011.

Deena Ombres, associate general counsel for ResCare Inc., has used Spilman for the Louisville, Ky.-based residential care, training and support company's general litigation needs as well as employment work. "The reason we keep going back is the quality of their service. They're reliable and they're available on an emergency basis," she said. "Compared to a national firm, we're paying almost half for the same service and experience."

Significant accomplishments in 2011 included a victory for client E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co. against multiple toxic tort claims by citizens of Parkersburg, W.Va., due to exposure to a chemical called C-8. The plaintiffs, who had yet to show any ill effects, sought medical monitoring, but Spilman defeated the initial class certification motion in 2008, and led the team that defeated most of the remaining claims on a motion for summary judgment, leaving only a few individual claims that the plaintiffs voluntarily dismissed. The class certification and summary judgment rulings are under appeal. — Lisa Hutton

WOLF HALENDEISTEIN ADLER FREEMAN & HERTZ

This 71-attorney New York class action litigation firm was founded in 1888 and has grown to include offices in Chicago and San Diego. It combines a core class action concentration with real estate transactions and litigation, as well as the representation of health care institutions. "Almost exclusively, most firms that regularly do class action work represent either plaintiffs or defendants," said managing partner Fred Isquith. "Our firm, because of its broader business practice, represents clients on both sides of the v."

The firm claims among its real estate clients more large cooperatives and condominiums than any New York competitor. Its approach is intended to ensure that its real estate and health care clients are assured of expert assistance in cases of high-stakes contingent litigation. Partners manage costs by striking a balance between contingent fee litigation and traditional billing.

Wolf Halsenstein's achievements last year included the July settlement of claims by a class representing domestic long-grain rice producers against Bayer CropScience L.P. over contamination by its genetically modified variety. The class recovered $750 million for lost sales in markets, including the European Union, that don't allow the sale of genetically modified rice. Partner Adam Levitt and co-lead Don Downing of Gray, Ritter & Graham were on the case, in which they pioneered the use of futures-based market analyses to estimate damages.

In McDonough v. Babies "R" Us Inc., Wolf Halsenstein was co-lead counsel, along with attorneys from Spector Roseman Kodroff & Willis and Hagens Berman Sobol & Shapiro, in arguing that the nation's largest retailer of baby products conspired to artificially inflate its prices. The team won class certification and ultimately a settlement of $35.5 million.

The real estate practice was co-counsel in moving Young & Rubicam Inc. from New York's Madison Avenue after 85 years to new digs better suited to contemporary practices across town in Columbus Circle. The financial details weren't released, but the agency secured naming rights to the new building.

The firm absorbed a litigation loss for hedge-fund investors against the partners, auditors and affiliates who gave money to the Bernie Madoff ponzi scheme. A federal judge ruled that the defendants may have been imprudent, but had not deceived their investors.

The philosophy, Isquith said, is simple: "To treat each client's issue as a business problem to be resolved efficiently and with cost consciousness." — Roger Adler

WYRICK ROBBINS YATES & PONTON

Once known for textiles and tobacco, central North Carolina is now all about technology. And in the Research Triangle region that links Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill, Wyrick Robbins Yates & Ponton is a regional firm with a rising national reputation.

Founding partner James Yates — he goes by "Jimmy" — said that from its beginnings in 1979 the firm focused on early-stage companies, while major local competitors were still focused on banks, utilities and insurance companies. "We represented a company that built a special cargo door in the days before overnight delivery exploded. They knocked on 150 doors trying to raise $2 million. That was the earliest venture-capital story in North Carolina, and we were there."
Today, with 66 attorneys, Wyrick Robbins is small even by regional standards. But 50 percent of the company’s lawyers are laterals from larger national firms including Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati and Cooley, which means there’s plenty of dealmaking experience on board. "We’re a top firm in our region, but we also see ourselves as an affordable alternative for national clients who need solid experience in the niches we fill," Yates said.

Those niches are in four practice areas — corporate (mergers and acquisitions, health care, intellectual property and tax); litigation (appellate, commercial, government contracting and labor); commercial real estate; and wealth preservation, blending trusts and estates with tax-exempt organizations and family law.

The firm assisted in several major matters in 2011, including the $3.9 billion acquisition in December of longtime client Pharmaceutical Product Development Inc. by The Carlyle Group L.P. and Hellman & Friedman LLC, described by The Wall Street Journal as the third-largest private-equity transaction in 2011. Raleigh-based Waste Industries USA Inc., which went private in 2008, used Wyrick to help close a $750 million secured credit line with Bank of America in March 2011.

Lisa Inman, Waste Industries' general counsel, said her company had worked with Wyrick for nearly three decades. "You get a lot of expertise there without a lot of baggage and overhead," she said. "They rely a lot on lateral hiring, so their people are really experienced and sharp. We're getting the benefits of the bigger firms without the cost."

Yates says its in-house counsel relationships have been critical to the firm's growth and have exposed it to a national audience including Hewlett-Packard Co. and GlaxoSmithKline PLC. "GCs at growing companies are under intense pressure," Yates said. "We've created a model that's a viable alternative to a New York or Palo Alto firm." — Lisa Holton

ZUCKERMAN SPAEDER

Founded in 1975, this Washington-based litigation firm recently expanded its New York office, bringing on Steve Cohen, a former aide to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo; Paul Shechtman, director of criminal justice under former New York Governor George Pataki; and experienced litigator Andrew Tombac. The Baltimore office welcomed a five-person crew from Murphy & Shaffer, including name partners William Murphy and Robert Shaffer, two of Maryland's top business litigators.

The Obama administration has a way of hiring Zuckerman lawyers, such as Leslie Berger Kiemen, a long-time partner, now deputy counsel to the president.

"What we offer is a smart, hands-on approach in assisting our clients," Cohen said. "We understand that litigation is not an end in itself and needs to be part of an overall plan to achieve a result."

Zuckerman frequently gets the call when the feds come knocking — it represented senior officials at Enron Corp., Fannie Mae, Refco Inc. and Stanford Financial Group. More recently, a team led by partner William Taylor III, including partners Amit Mehta and Shawn Naunton, defended Dominique Strauss-Kahn when a hotel maid in New York accused the former managing director of the International Monetary Fund of sexual assault. The firm helped to establish inconsistencies in her testimony, and in August the charges were dropped.

The firm won a $5.3 million damages award for Matthew Lawlor, ousted founder and chief executive officer of Online Resources Corp., the first Internet banking-services provider. By collecting and analyzing the company's financials, the firm convinced a jury that his severance contracts had been breached and that Online had profited. Lead counsel was Graeme Bush, the firm's managing partner and chairman.

Zuckerman helped Ranbaxy Laboratories Inc. gain regulatory approval for its generic version of Lipitor and to maintain its entitlement to 180 days as the only generic version on the market. Handling the case were Carmen Shepard and Kate Beardsley, along with Carlos Angulo and Alexandra Miller.

Zuckerman maintains a vigorous pro bono program. Partners William Murphy and John Connolly, along with associate Daniel Moylan, led a campaign that secured the release via a habeas corpus proceeding of a Yemeni national following more than eight years of detention in Afghanistan and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. However, Mehta was unsuccessful in a challenge under the District of Columbia Innocence Protection Act to the 35-years-to-life sentence given to a pro bono client on the strength of allegedly sketchy eyewitness testimony. — Roger Adler