

A Culture of Collegiality

An Interview with
Joseph M. Leccese, Esq., Chairman, Proskauer Rose LLP

EDITORS' NOTE Joseph Leccese is also Co-Head of the Sports Law Group. He has a broad-based corporate practice with particular emphasis on the representation of professional sports leagues, teams, and owners; college conferences; media and marketing companies; and financial institutions that provide capital to the broad array of transactions that occur in the sports industry. He also has broad experience advising rights holders on regional, national, and international television contracts with major telecasters; the exploitation of new media and technology rights; and a variety of matters relating to the exploitation of stadia and arenas, including naming rights, sponsorship agreements, seat licenses, and related arrangements.



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FIRM BRIEF Proskauer Rose LLP (proskauer.com), founded in 1875, is a global law firm providing a wide variety of legal services to clients worldwide from offices in Beijing, Boca Raton, Boston, Chicago, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, Newark, Paris, São Paulo, and Washington, D.C. The firm has experience in all areas of practice important to businesses, including corporate finance, mergers and acquisitions, private equity, real estate transactions, bankruptcy and reorganizations, taxation, litigation, trusts and estates, intellectual property, and labor and employment law. Its clients include participants in many industries including chemicals, entertainment, financial services, healthcare, hospitality, information technology, insurance, internet, manufacturing, media and communications, pharmaceuticals, real estate investment, sports, and transportation.

What is the secret to the long-term success Proskauer has had?

We have always prided ourselves on the level of collegiality and respect that exists among our partners, which is reflected in our entire staff. With that culture, you can navigate the good times easily and the bad times effectively.

We're going to celebrate our 140th anniversary next year.; 2008 may have been challenging, but we were founded 10 years after the Civil War, so we have dealt with a lot.

We believe that if we maintain our spirit and culture of collegiality, we can handle anything.

Is it important to have the people who are joining the firm understand that heritage?

Perspective is important at all times, but like most law firms, we have a relatively young workforce. The generation of young professionals coming out of school grew up in a post-9/11, post-Great Recession environment. Painting that broader picture shows them that, sitting in midtown Manhattan in 2014, they have great opportunity in their lives and careers, and even enormously adverse events can be overcome.

Are certain areas more of a focus for Proskauer than others?

We essentially do everything from M&A to capital markets to financings to big litigations, and the specialties that go with these areas. We also have a large labor employment practice and a very large sports practice.

We're in business to service our clients, and as life and transactions get more complicated, more of our clients need that full range of services. So our goal is to deepen each of those offerings.

How challenging is it to differentiate among those top-tier firms?

It depends upon the specialty, but each of the firms has a certain brand associated with it. Our brand has evolved rapidly over the past 15 years as we have become known as more of a corporate law firm. Many of our deals are national and global in scope.

Each of us can carve out our own identity. Being perceived as New York firms is already an imprimatur. We are specialists in the highest level of legal work and, within that broader category, we each have our own individual brands.

How strong is your global footprint?

We currently only have about 10 percent of our lawyers outside the U.S., but I expect that to increase over time. We're proud of our New York heritage and will continue that legacy, but London and Hong Kong are major financial centers, and we have presences there. We're also in São Paulo because it's the financial capital of South America.

How critical is it that your workforce mirrors your diverse client base?

I've spent more time on that issue as Chairman than on any other issue. Nearly one-third of Fortune 500 companies have a general counsel who is a woman or member of a minority group. That percentage will only increase. The next layer down is even more diverse.

While there is a business necessity for diversity, we're more focused on the moral necessity. The legal profession has lagged, particularly on retaining minority lawyers.

We have instituted processes to attract and retain these young lawyers so they can become part of the leadership of this firm.

What do you see as the value of your pro bono work?

It has always been a legacy of our firm as it is for our peers. We dedicate tens of thousands of hours annually of pro bono time. Many of our most senior partners served in a variety of ways, so they are consistent voices internally for perpetuating the process.

We have a variety of programs in the firm that are designed to match younger lawyers with community board seats, but we encourage them to get involved in their communities in any way they can, even if it's just coaching Little League.

Looking back on when you joined the firm, have things turned out as you anticipated?

I could not have predicted any of the things that have happened when I joined this firm in 1986, but the way the profession and New York City have thrived over the past three decades exceeds what any rational person might have expected.

I've also been fortunate to have had widespread support by the partnership to do the things we needed to do to compete in this more highly competitive global environment. We prefer to compete externally and not internally, so with that support I have been able to lead in a more effective way.

Does your leadership role make it more difficult to find client time?

The partners supported me in having a managing partner for the firm, who also continues to practice. Between the two of us, we dedicate more hours to the firm than any one person could dedicate, yet we've been able to retain our practices. So I still spend a lot of time practicing law.

Are you surprised to see how tight-knit the business community is in New York?

I give a lot of credit to Kathy Wylde. The Partnership for New York City is an extraordinary opportunity for people to meet on particular issues and share ideas. Kathy does a marvelous job of communicating those ideas to the political leadership in the city and state.

I don't know what New York did before there was such a platform. ●