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## Ten Key Components to Sustaining a Small Law Firm

We thought it would be worthwhile, at this juncture, to try to identify some of the factors that we believe have kept us in business as we approach our seven-year mark in May of this year. Here they are, in no particular order:

By **Rebecca Rosenberger Smolen and Amy Neifeld Shkedy** | January 03, 2019



**Rebecca Rosenberger Smolen, left, and Amy Neifeld Shkedy, right, of Bala Law Group.**

Four and a half years ago, in the middle of 2014, and two years into our venture, in another article in the Legal, we shared our thoughts on launching and establishing a law firm after nearly 30 years of collective experience as lawyers. We thought it would be worthwhile, at this juncture, to try to identify some of the factors that we believe have kept us in business as we approach our seven-year mark in May of this year. Here they are, in no particular order:

**Communication.** We learned the importance of quality communication from our colleagues at our prior law firms. We take care to communicate in a clear and prompt (not just timely) manner with each other, as law partners, and with our clients and other parties involved in our client matters—whether opposing parties or collaborating professionals. We do our best to avoid any miscommunication or misunderstanding.

**Respect.** We respect all parties with whom we interact in our work, including our mail deliverers and cleaning staff. In turn, we nearly always receive their support and respect, which helps us accomplish our goals. It also helps us all enjoy our working relationships together.

**Triage.** We are always juggling a lot of matters—whether specific client matters or law firm administration matters. We spend a lot of time making sure we attend to matters in the right order, so we don't miss any important deadlines, and so that we can accomplish our clients' objectives. If something must be deferred, it is usually a billing cycle.

**Working Within Budget.** Each year, so far, we have been able to stick to our expense budget, and come in a bit under budget. By managing our overhead expenses carefully, we have been able to avoid any significant hikes in our hourly rates. This, of course, has helped keep our clients satisfied with the value we can provide to them.

**Staffing.** So far we have not brought on junior lawyers. At some point we will, presumably, want to take that step, but, not having junior lawyers has allowed us to focus on growing and nurturing our client base without needing to take the time to guide the next generation of lawyers and manage those relationships, as well. We outsource matters we can't handle ourselves to other professionals who have gained our trust.

**Billing.** Our goal remains to send bills out each month. Every once in a while we have needed to skip a month of billing (for triage reasons, as noted above), but, to date, we have not needed to skip more than one month. This helps with our firm's cash flow

while providing timely communication with clients about both their cost for our services, and what tasks we have undertaken on their behalves.

**Reliability.** We manage our personal and vacation schedules so there is nearly always someone at the office (or someone able to reply promptly to a call or email) ready to address a last-minute need for a client.

**Enough Satisfied Clients.** We recognize that while you can please some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, you cannot please all of the people all of the time. We do our best to keep all of our clients pleased, and accept that, from time to time, for one reason or another beyond our control, we may not always accomplish that objective. As one of the “Mad Men” characters (maybe Don Draper) said—the minute you get a client you start to lose that client. It’s part of the process, and since other local lawyers have the same experience, there are gains to offset the losses.

**Avoid Office Conflicts.** We adhere to the same often-proposed strategy for a married couple —“never go to bed angry.” While as law partners we may see things differently from time to time, whether on the appropriate legal strategy for a client, or a law firm management issue, we talk it out and find a mutually agreeable path forward.

**Enjoy Our Work.** We continue to enjoy the work that we do, working with each other, outside professionals supporting us on our matters and working with our clients. Our least favorite activity remains billing, but, as we all must learn, it’s a necessary evil. Like most of our peers, we cannot afford to have our work become a hobby.

It’s interesting to reflect on what we consider to be the core factors of sustaining our firm. When we first established this law firm, back in 2012, we did not know what to expect, or even if we could make this work on our own. In retrospect, at least for us, it has been much like learning to walk, ride a bicycle, or any other of those “natural”

things in life. Once you get the hang of it, just like with all of the law firm founders/entrepreneurs of the past, you just take one step at a time and keep moving forward.

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