

Innovative Managing Partner: Gibbons' Patrick Dunican

By Hilary Russ

Law360, New York (June 15, 2010) -- The Gibbons PC logo — shining out from the top of its Newark, N.J., headquarters in a glow of white and blue wattage — is the biggest outward emblem of the firm's transformation, one that has put it at the apex of marketing and branding in the legal industry and landed its young leader, Patrick C. Dunican Jr., on Law360's list of Most Innovative Managing Partners.

Selected in November 2003 at the age of 36 to manage Gibbons, Dunican has since relocated and upgraded the firm's headquarters, installed the latest in conferencing and communications technology, eliminated summer associates entirely, pushed alternative fee arrangements, laid out a clear definition for the firm's target clients, and instituted initiatives to recruit women and minorities.

His vision has translated into success by the numbers or any other standard: he's added 80 lawyers, opened new offices in Philadelphia and Wilmington, and increased the firm's revenues by 64 percent — to \$111 million in 2009 as compared to 2004 — and profits by 134 percent, the firm said.

One of the reasons he was able to be so nimble in the leadership role: “Not knowing what I didn't know,” said Dunican, now 43.

“We were tackling literally every issue that could come up, trying to do something and go in a different direction,” he said.

Even before other firms began shortening their names and modernizing their images, Dunican started forging ahead, moving the firm's headquarters across the street to Newark's Gateway Center building in 2007 and emblazoning the firm's name atop the building.

Now, airline passengers flying into the area and drivers on the New Jersey Turnpike are likely to see the Gibbons name competing with Prudential Financial Inc.'s sign for attention on the city's skyline.





Patrick C. Dunican Jr.

“That’s pretty aggressive, pretty innovative,” said Patrick Hobbs, dean of Seton Hall University Law School, of Dunican’s push to get naming rights to the building. “A lot of people might have said Pat, don’t ask for that.”

Seton Hall is Dunican’s alma mater and the recipient of a \$1 million donation to establish the Gibbons Institute of Law, Science and Technology at the urging of Dunican, who is also secretary for the school’s Board of Visitors.

Securing the naming rights to a building is generally a West Coast idea, Dunican said.

“On the East Coast it’s kind of a new phenomenon,” he said. “The clients love it.”

The new headquarters closely followed Dunican’s move, also in 2007, to slice the firm’s moniker down to just one partner’s name, that of John Gibbons.

Gibbons, who Dunican called “legal royalty” in the state, had rejoined the firm in 1990 after 20 years at the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, where he was chief judge.

Other firms have since copied the name change idea.

“Gibbons has got one of the most comprehensive, multifaceted and sophisticated branding initiatives that you’ll ever see in a law firm,” said Steve Adubato, the journalist, public speaker and former New Jersey legislator who anchors public affairs and news programs for Channel Thirteen/WNET (PBS).

Adubato has been so impressed with Gibbons’ campaign under Dunican that he is including the firm in his forthcoming book on branding — the only law firm in the country that Adubato mentions in the book.

Inside Gibbons’ new headquarters is perhaps an even greater key to the firm’s innovation: state-of-the-art technology with Voice Over Internet Protocol, audiovisual conferencing, smart boards — and a small army of lawyers and some staffers outfitted with mobile devices tied into the firm and to clients.

“We remade our space down to the studs,” Dunican said of the new gadgets and technology, installed to deliver better service to clients.

The building also boasts a moot courtroom that attorneys use to prepare for trial, a central leather-laden lounge with view of New York City, and a conference center outfitted with wireless capacity and the ability to flip a switch and hold video meetings with partners in Gibbons’ other regional offices.

He also saved the firm money with the new lease and by chopping the size of partners’ offices in half. That idea that was not initially popular but gained traction after Dunican assured them that the firm would pass cost savings on to clients — and in the end the partners would take home more money themselves, he said.

“He gave the best space on that floor to a lounge for the lawyers and employees,” Seton Hall's Hobbs said. “Part of it is his youth. He's still quite young. He brings energy to it. He's envied, but he's also admired.”

When the New Jersey Law Center needed to update its old building, it went to Gibbons for money and for inspiration.

“We very much piggybacked off what they did,” said Angela C. Scheck, executive director of the law center, which houses the New Jersey Bar Association and four other groups and is home to a conference center used for legal education.

“We used his firm as a model for what we wanted to do,” she said. “We went to their new offices, got a tour, talked to their IT people.”

The center's architect also talked to the firm's professionals, and Dunican gave the center access to Gibbons' contractors and construction tradesmen. Gibbons became the project's lead donor, and now the construction process, which has been “very smooth,” is nearly finished.

But Dunican hasn't spawned followers and admirers just for his marketing and renovation savvy.

Inside the firm, Dunican was also implementing changes that would help it back up its sleeker, shinier image with the substance for which clients and young lawyers were clamoring.

Dunican won national recognition — repeatedly — for driving forward the Gibbons Women's Initiative and promoting the firm's first class of exclusively women directors and counsel in 2006.

And he was years ahead of many other firms in promoting alternative billing arrangements. By 2005, he had already published an article on the topic, and he began urging partners to consider other means of charging clients outside traditional hourly rates.

Dunican also made the firm a regional force while also avoiding merger opportunities that would have led it astray from its defined client base: the “sweet spot” of major deals for midmarket companies with annual revenues between \$100 million and \$2.5 billion, and midmarket deals for major companies, he said.

“We identified who we were, but more importantly who we were not,” he said. “We don't represent mom and pop, but we also don't try to compete for work with the New York elite firms.”

And he sacked the firm's first-year associate program completely in order to bring in experienced judicial clerks.

That was six years ago, and at the time “nobody was telling me what a visionary I was,” he said. Only last summer, when Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP said it would nix its summer program, did others think it was a good move, he said.

“We aren't charging you to train young lawyers,” said Dunican, who has pushed for legal education and lawyer development in other ways.

The clerks are “very sophisticated, high-level clerks,” he said. “People want to work here because it's hard to get in here. We're attracting higher-level, quality candidates.”

Clients these days are far more selective about the firms they choose. They examine how many women partners a firm has, its work-life balance policies, whether lawyers come from diverse backgrounds, what kind of technology it uses to communicate.

“They're getting really granular, very detailed. They're reaching their hands inside the firm to some degree,” he said. “If you're entrepreneurial, it's a good thing. We learned what we need to be looking at and what we need to be focusing on.”

Yet what may appear from the outside like drastic and sudden change has in fact been planned evolution, Dunican said.

“We are trained to be risk adverse, to counsel our clients on the avoidance of risk,” he said. “Innovation is an evolutionary process.”

“Things just can't happen overnight. There needs to be incremental change rather than radical revolution,” he said.

It took the firm three years, for instance, to decide on and then plan out its big move. And the name change was made after a consultant studied the issue, he said.

Whenever he comes up with another zany idea, others in the room may ask what other firms are doing, he said.

“That's not innovation. I don't necessarily care what other firms are doing,” Dunican said. “We have to look at whether this makes sense for us.”

Dunican says he reads four newspapers a day, every legal publication he can get his hands on, the business press and books on management and other topics, so he knows everything that's going on.

“You're focused all the time on the business of your firm,” he said, admitting that he does not get much rest.

“He never sleeps,” said Hobbs. “I'm sure when he does nod off, he dreams most often about what [he] can do next to position this firm for the future.”



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