

BEYOND JUST THE LAW □ SERVICES AND SOLUTIONS - ECIJA

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If you mix sports, legal services and technological solutions, the result is a firm primed to capitalise on the old adage of “slow and steady wins the race”.

La faceta más destacable y lo que distingue a la firma Ecija del resto es su apuesta pionera en la provisión de soluciones legales (que no servicios legales), en especial en el sector de las nuevas tecnologías y de las telecomunicaciones.

As a passionate sportsman, triathlons in particular, Hugo Écija, Ecija's Founding Partner, knows that results come from hard work, perseverance and long-term goals.

“I approach everything with a sports mentality. If you want to run a marathon you can't decide 'hey I'm going to run a marathon next week'. You need to start with a few kilometres, build up slowly to avoid injury or burn out, and set yourself realistic achievable objectives.” That is his approach to sports, and, more importantly, that is also his approach to business.

In today's culture of rapid results, it is surprising how often people make the mistake of expecting

progress overnight. "When we founded Ecija in 1997, we weren't thinking about the year 2000," he says. "I was 25 and I was thinking about where I wanted us to be when I was 40. I am in a firm that people want to merge with, and a firm that I still really want to work in." Yes, they are where they thought they would be, a bit bigger than anticipated, but this growth and consistent moving up the ranks has been the result of an extremely clear "step-by-step" strategy that goes well beyond just providing legal services.

You cannot really put Ecija in the "boutique" law firm category, as with over 250 professionals, it is anything but. So it has carved a new box for itself.

Where its strengths lie and what continues to distinguish Ecija from the crowd is its pioneering approach to providing legal solutions rather than legal services, in particular in the TMT (technology, media & telecommunications) sectors. As the world goes more "online" than "off-line", Ecija moves right along with it, rather than trying to keep up like many of its competitors, and specialises in innovative, "off-the-shelf" legal products for its clients worldwide – an approach it has taken from the outset. Ecija merged with Novagnet in 2006, a consultancy specialised in developing IP and legal know-how systems, and the firm's lawyers sit side-by-side with business and technical consultants.

Therefore, looking beyond a traditional interpretation of 'legal services' and providing value to the client are key to Ecija's brand; but it is "anticipation" that is at the heart of Ecija's success, Hugo says. Prime example – the establishment of its privacy and regulatory practice in 2007, geared towards providing solutions for regulatory compliance. As compliance has recently taken a big leap to the top of the agenda, and with ever more regulation and increasing risk and regulatory compliance needs, both legal and technological, this anticipatory approach is coming into its own and truly showing its worth.

Expanding discretely

A definite side to this "step-by-step" approach is the intention to do so with discretion. Anticipate where a need will arise, establish a "presence", tread carefully and only shout about it when you are firmly established. This ensures that you advertise your successes when you know they are there for the long-term. If something doesn't work out as planned, you can retreat without anyone being the wiser. Prime examples would be the Barcelona and Miami offices.

A little known fact is that the Barcelona office was actually started six years ago, opening a small office when they reached 4/5 lawyers, and only announcing its presence when they joined forces with Gabriel Nadal in 2010, because that was when they were sure that the Barcelona project was long-term, says Hugo, with plans in place to elevate its status to that of Madrid.

As for the Miami office, while inaugurated as an international office in 2008, it has turned out to be just a "presence", which may have been a lesson in the benefits of discretion when internationalising – something that is now very much in line with the Ecija approach.

To have an international office, one must accept that it's a long term investment that won't really begin to realise its worth for around five years, says Hugo: "It's a big investment and you should keep a low profile until it bears fruit." Ultimately, Spanish lawyers should provide a good service at home and refer to international law firms, he says. "Our business is Spain." The focus, therefore, is now firmly on Madrid and Barcelona.

A radical approach

The legal world is not what it used to be. With the explosion of the Internet, the fountain of information available online increases at an astounding rate, and lawyers need to counteract by proving their value-add and in a highly competitive manner. "We need to acknowledge that the things we are charging for now may be free in five or so years' time," says Hugo. "We need to plan ahead and innovate, and concentrate on providing services that you won't be able to find for free online or with our competitors."

So they are adopting a radical approach, he says, in anticipation, adapting certain fees now rather

than wait for the day they become redundant – all of which is geared towards providing “value” and ensuring client retention.

“People tend to just look at the near-term, two or three years, for short-term financial gain,” he says. “We believe it’s vital to look at the long-term relationships – five, 10 years’ time – and their importance to your balance sheet. If you treat your clients well, they will stay with you and the return can be tremendous.”

Value

Ecija is also greater than just the sum of its partners, Hugo says – there are no egos and the client isn’t the prize of the lawyer, the client is King, “and we make sure never to forget that”.

Ecija has therefore been evolving with its clients, particularly in these critical times,

moving into new areas and opening departments as necessary. “When we look at implementing new initiatives we ask ourselves: ‘What purpose would that serve for the client?’ If none, then it makes absolutely no sense to do it,” says Hugo.

They interpret value in terms of what the client would term as “value”. It is no longer sufficient just to be a good lawyer, you also have to be a good communicator, analyser, disseminator of information and be as business-minded as your client. If you can anticipate and leverage your firm’s skills against your clients’ business needs, whether real or perceived, legal or otherwise, and keep up with them, then you will be providing true “value”.

This coupling of legal services with meeting client business needs is not only embedded in their TMT practice. Ecija’s lawyers collaborate with technology information professionals to offer comprehensive advice to their clients, and every member of the firm is kept up to speed on the available technologies and solutions.

This multi-disciplinary approach, however, could pose a potential challenge when it comes to market perception: how to marry being a “solutions” provider with being accepted as a full service “legal services” provider as part of the firm is made up of technology information professionals and solutions.

The future

Hugo looks at their objectives in terms of stages. Take his triathlons, for example. “You can only win when you’re running, but at that point you are running on empty and using your heart and your reserves.” “Heart” is another factor in the Ecija brand – on the outside taking inspiration from an Anglo-Saxon business model, while internally a culture with a distinct Latin flavour, Ecija has taken the best of both worlds.

They will also continue with their strategy that it is definitely not a sprint. “There are ups and downs. As an athlete knows, in your career, you can have injuries and you can have periods where you are out of the race; but if you persist and you work hard then the prizes will come,” says Hugo. “What comes easy, goes easy too – what’s hard to get, stays.”

Ecija is consistently coming up in conversation given its numerous top-10 rankings at home and worldwide, for example, Top Tier in TMT in both Chambers 2011 and Legal500 2011, and the awards to its lawyers – so it must be doing something right. As a legal “solutions” provider, something that may not have sat comfortably with some in the market, given how the legal landscape has changed, Ecija has the market’s attention.

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