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Local law and accounting firms playing the name game

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What's in a name? For law and accounting firms, the answer is often a lot of names.

But unlike other companies, the names of these local firms are often subject to change for a variety of reasons, even if marketing 101 foretells the potential pitfalls of changing up a longtime moniker.

That has recently been the case for two of Birmingham's largest law firms.

In February, **White Arnold Andrews & Dowd PC** changed its name to White Arnold & Dowd PC, after the retirement of George W. Andrews.

Johnston Barton Proctor & Rose LLP, formerly **Johnston Barton Proctor & Powell** LLP, changed its name for the sixth time in 2007, after the death of Charles "Butch" Powell, a longtime partner.

Clark Hammond, a partner with the firm, said a lot of thought went into the decision.

"You don't make this type of decision lightheartedly," Hammond said. "When a firm has a name that's been out there for several years, it becomes somewhat institutionalized. If you change, you may lose some of that branding."

That's the danger that comes with making a change, even if there is a good reason to do so, according to Stephen Craft, dean of business programs at **Birmingham-Southern College**.

"There's a lot of equity in a name, hopefully with positive associations," Craft said.

Craft said name changes can be costly, not just from the built-up branding that a company can lose, but also because of the numerous costs that come along with a change.

Signage, letterheads, Web addresses and advertisements usually have to be changed, which can represent a big cost for firms.

"How often do you want to replace all those materials?" Craft said. "It's something to think about, especially for a firm with partners who are on the younger side."

That's one reason Craft said it is often a good idea to name a firm or company after an individual who is dead or has retired.

The other reason is reputation.

"You never know what might happen to the reputation of a live partner," Craft said.

Those factors have led some new firms to choose a generic name that might not have the name recognition, but won't need to be changed due to external factors.

Michael McCraw, managing partner of **Covenant Consulting Group**'s Riverchase office, said that was the case for his firm, which he founded along with Raiford Dyer and Bryan Finison after the firm they were working for was involved in a merger.

McCraw said the firm eventually decided to use the word "covenant" to represent a trust with its employees and clients.

"We talked long and hard about using our own names, but that's done so often," McCraw said.

McCraw said the firm often gets questions about its name and has gotten a positive response from clients.

Craft said the tradition of law and accounting firms using partners' names began when the firms were so small that the public knew who was practicing there.

Over time, that tradition grew until there was a certain prestige attached to it.

"It became an honor and ego thing to see that name on the door," Craft said.

Considering that the larger Birmingham law firms have between 30 and 115 partners and just two to five individuals in their firm names, that makes it more difficult and prestigious to become a namesake.

"People come and go, but it's more difficult for a single person to join and get his name in the marquis, so to speak," Hammond said.

It's also more difficult because many firms have decided to keep their names the same for longer periods of time.

Alabama's largest law firm, **Bradley Arant Rose & White** LLP, which was founded in 1871 as Hewitt & Walker, has had more than a dozen individuals on the firm's marquee during its history.

The firm's current namesakes - made up of two Birmingham legal icons, a bond lawyer from the Great Depression era and another established partner - have been set for more than four decades.

And despite the long history of changes, that's not something firm leaders want to change any time soon.

"When you have a well-known name, it makes your job easier. You have a reputation - that means something to people," said Beau Grenier, chairman of the firm's executive committee.

One thing firms have done without changing their names is to take steps to shorten the sometimes cumbersome monikers in their branding.

For instance, the Web site for both Bradley Arant Rose & White and Johnston Barton Proctor & Rose are both made up of the first two individuals' names, rather than an acronym or abbreviation that some firms use.

For both of the firms, those two individuals are also used more prominently in the firms' logos.

"There's a trend of taking several names and cutting them down to make things simpler as far as the ease of putting (it) on business cards and such," Hammond said.

But despite the convenience, he said those names still mean something, which makes even shortening a name a difficult proposition.

"Those names mean something in the public eye," he said. "A segment of the community knew those folks and came to the firm because of them."

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