

Case Insight 12.1: Withers Worldwide

Laura Boyle, Head of EU Marketing and Business Development

In this sequence, we talk to Laura Boyle, Head of EU Marketing and Business Development. Laura gives us an understanding of how a new market insight system can be used to develop a consistent offering across different international markets.

Withers started out as a London based firm, a few centuries ago and it's been through a period of really exciting growth over the last decade, so the firm's management set out a decade ago to sort of track or predict the future movements of global wealth and private capital and set out really to be quite different from our competitors in this space of law firms so focused on individuals and families and their associated wealth and businesses.

So we sought out where do we think we need to be to match the needs of our clients? So that process of growth started with a merger with a law firm in the States and since then, we've added a new office every year, pretty much every year for ten years and in the last six months, it's been even faster growth so we've now got 18 offices across the United States, Europe, Asia, and the Caribbean, so it's been a really exciting time for us.

We've been helping a major international, very well-known brand, a business that's backed by a family so a family owned business and we've been helping the family members with thinking about their tax and their wealth planning and thinking about their succession planning for the future, and who's going to help take over the business when they might want to exit and we've also been helping them think about the commercial elements of the business and its expansion overseas, so that's involved thinking about some merger activity in Asia and also some associated disputes, so nobody wants to get into litigation but of course it crops up sometimes and we've been able to help with that.

We are the largest law firm in the world that's focused on the needs of private individuals, families and their companies and their associated charitable and philanthropic interest, so that's a really interesting place for us to be in the market because we can build on the hundreds of years of experience of acting for this client base but we can now do it internationally, so we think that gives us a really in-depth understanding of how that sort of private capital led business, private capital led charity, how those sorts of organisations operate and with that kind of sector in-depth knowledge of the clients, we can provide a really different service.

So the thing that we really think makes us different and makes us stand out in the market is the international coverage that we've achieved, so lots of other law firms operating in this space tend to do so in their local markets.

We've set out to achieve this international coverage so we've got 18 offices internationally and that means that we offer a really consistent service, so we've thought about the ways that we want all of our Withers lawyers to operate and if you go and take some advice from our Tokyo office, it will be exactly the same as the advice you'd get from our California office and that's really different, that really helps us stand out. And by extension, the additional benefit to the client there is that that efficiency brings better cost savings, better cost efficiency, so that's a direct benefit for the client.

That's really interesting because we actually think that variability is a positive for us and that might be different from other businesses, I'm not sure. So for us, we're able to offer a much better service to our clients if we can offer them different levels of lawyers and at different prices, so going into any pitch situation with a client, the first thing we'll do is try and understand exactly what their objectives are, so are they going into a big piece of litigation where they need all holds barred, you know, high level partner advice and you know, it's a critical thing for their business, they need to make a big impact and they might want to throw all resources at the problem, or is it a lighter touch approach that's needed, bearing in mind their commercial outcomes?

So that's the key bit, sitting down and understanding what does the client really want and then how can we deliver it cost effectively and that often might mean bringing in teams of paralegals, junior associates, trainees, all supervised by partners with really in-depth experience of the matter in hand and that blend of services gives clients hopefully exactly what they need and so that variability is actually a really good thing for us.

So in terms of the, the problem that we'd outlined, following our international expansion, we really wanted to understand what do our clients think about us? We suddenly had this whole new set of clients globally, that our 18 officers are servicing, so historically, we'd always relied on face to face, one to one client feedback and that's been fantastic, it's very much based on they trust their advisor relationship and that's how we approach everything we do as a business, that our lawyers will operate based on a really close, in-depth understanding of clients, but the problem that left us with centrally was that we didn't have really clear empirical idea of what our clients think about us, so we decided to add to that client lawyer relationship with something a bit more formal.

So we put in place a programme of monthly surveys that go out to clients on a matter closed, so whenever a piece of work finishes and that's given us a set of data that we're able to use to achieve consistency in our service internationally and that can really support our growth and marketing strategy.

Another element of the problem that we've had to face is thinking about how you seek feedback from clients in a partnership environment. So one of the key parts of a partnership is that closeness of relationship between a lawyer and their client and we've had to do a lot of work internally, talking to our lawyers about how the client insight programme can enhance their relationships rather than threaten them.

As we've been going through this period of international expansion, we realised that we needed to formalise or standardise the way that we seek feedback from clients. We've relied for a long time on one to one or personalised face to face feedback which has been great but with the size that we're now at, we needed to find a better way to check in on whether we're delivering on that central promise to our clients about the fact that we could offer consistent services across our offices.

So we've thought about a number of ways that we can do this better and we're still working on it. We've put in place a client insights system, so one aspect of that is a monthly survey that goes out to clients whenever they finish a particular matter or a piece of work with us. All the data that comes in from that survey internationally is fed into a dashboard system that any member of our client services or legal teams can access at any point, which is fantastic because it means that they can deal immediately with any issues or problems that arise in a matter but also that data can be fed into wider trends centrally at the firm, so we can work closely with different offices to ensure that we're delivering on that promise, that we offer the same service.

So one trend that we've, we've seen and it's been really interesting, is that lots of clients have said that they know that we're the international law firm for individuals and families but that they didn't realise that we were operating in certain locations around the globe and so we've been able to use that to shift our marketing strategy and to work out that actually we could be a bit more confident in talking to our clients and saying, 'Yes, we do now have operations in Asia' and so that's really helped us drive and helped us think about the communications we make externally.

In addition to surveys, we also seek feedback at different points of the touch points in the relationship with clients, so for example, whenever we go through any pitch situation to try and win a new piece of work or a new piece of business, we'll always spend time with the client afterwards understanding why we won or lost that particular opportunity.

So it's fantastic now we've got 18 months' of data available to us and that's helping us in two main ways, so firstly it's helping us think about an internal client development programme to help us think about how we're working with our clients internationally and how we're delivering on that central promise to be consistent across our locations and secondly, it's helping drive marketing decisions so we're starting to see data that's helping us identify gaps in our services and gaps in our locations, which allows us to, to quickly recalibrate and address those.

So for example, we might have a client suggesting that they feel they need advice in a certain area we haven't yet got and we're quickly able to hire a team in that area and to deliver that service.

So it's a work in progress, we're still looking, you know, still looking at the data as we go but we think we're being able to make real changes to the way we run our business.

So for the future, we want to think about how this data can really continue helping us drive consistency across our service, so we've just started a great pilot in one of our teams in London, thinking about how they might all engage with the client services charter so that's a list of activities or ways of behaving with our clients, that they'll all commit to and that's going really well so far but we, you know, keep working on that and working out how we can roll that out to other teams.

The second element of plans for the future is around pricing so we want to start drawing out trends in the data, to think how we can drive our competitive pricing strategy.

Thirdly, we need to think carefully about how we can use this data better to benchmark ourselves externally, so far we've been thinking a lot about consistency of our international offering but how can we use this to track what we're doing against our competitors?

And finally, a priority for me is going to be working really hard on keeping up the internal engagement with the programme, so making sure that all the lawyers internationally understand the value it can add and as we add new teams or new locations internationally, that all of those new lawyers really understand what we're trying to do.