

# The Small Firm Stealing Clients Away From BigLaw

Share us on: By **Benjamin Horney**

Law360, New York (December 01, 2014, 11:32 PM ET) -- With only 11 attorneys, Valorem Law Group LLP might not be considered a serious threat to its larger rivals, but if client satisfaction is any guide, then BigLaw has reason to fear this new in-house counsel favorite.

Roughly 320 in-house counsel were surveyed for the BTI 2015 Client Service A-Team [report](#) from [BTI Consulting Group Inc.](#) (Wellesley, Massachusetts), an annual survey of top corporate attorneys that ranks law firms in a number of categories, such as innovation, client focus and breadth of services. Despite its meager size, the Chicago-based law firm earned top marks in six of the 17 categories in this year's survey for the second consecutive year.

According to BTI President Michael B. Rynowecer, Valorem's impressive showing came about because of the firm's relentless drive to do things differently than some of its larger rival firms.

"They're going after the big boys," Rynowecer said. "It's a firm with a loud voice."

Part of the firm's success could be attributed to its commitment to an alternative pricing system that allows clients the option of adjusting what they pay if they feel Valorem's bill doesn't reflect an appropriate value for the work performed.

"They are unfailing advocates of alternative fees," Rynowecer said.

But beyond that, Valorem is working hard to ensure it stays true to its values and principles, Rynowecer said, and that commitment is paying off.

"Valorem has been able to deliver a clear message about client focus and a new value proposition which resonates with a large number of general counsel," he said. "More importantly, the research shows Valorem is delivering on the promise."

Patrick Lamb, one of Valorem's founding partners, said that while the firm is always proud to make these types of lists, it doesn't try to worm its way into rankings. Instead, Valorem's attorneys keep their heads down and do the work the firm has set out to do.

"The cornerstone of what we decided to do when we started the firm was make clients happy," Lamb told Law360. "We design what we do with the clients' objective in mind."

The alternative pricing system has been particularly successful, according to Valorem, because it replaces the outdated method of billable hours that the firm says leaves room for attorneys to work at a turtle's pace in order to supersize their profit.

"We aren't shy about our dislike of the billable hour," the firm says on its website. "We too could move re-a-ll-y sl-owww-ly if we wanted to, but that's not good for you or your company."

Nicole Auerbach, also a founding partner at Valorem, echoed Lamb's sentiments, telling Law360 that the firm's smaller size allows it to bypass some of the inner politics that can make decisions difficult at larger firms.

"In BigLaw, there are often layers of hierarchy that hinder the knowledge of the case and the flexibility that I think benefits clients," she said. "I always ask [new clients] whether they think it is better to have three or five very intensely devoted people on their case or a cast of 15 to 20, some of whom have not seen the inside of a courtroom."

"The answer is always the same," she said.

Lamb noted that Valorem "begins with the premise that the client is the ultimate decider of service quality, not us."

The firm also works closely with companies' in-house counsel, which Lamb said helps make sure everyone is on the same page.

"We view [in-house counsel] as partners rather than competitors," Lamb said. "We'd be foolish not to have them be an integral part of our team. It allows us to get better knowledge fast."

While some might point to Valorem's short list of attorneys as a hindrance, Rynowecer said the firm's size has not appeared to have caused any harm.

"It's not so much size, it's how good you are at designing and implementing your system," Rynowecer said. "They don't see size as a big disadvantage."

In fact, Rynowecer said, despite its small size, Valorem goes after — and often gets — some big-name clients you might expect would be working with larger firms. Valorem's client list includes energy industry giants [FMC Technologies Inc.](#) and [Kinder Morgan](#), as well as travel website Kayak.com and medical device maker RF Surgical Systems.

Lamb said that the firm's size has actually helped because it allows more personal relationships with clients.

"Having the same people work for the same clients over and over again builds relationships, trust and confidence," he said. "It helps us stand out."

--Editing by Kat Laskowski and Patricia K. Cole.