

Meet the most feared law firms in New York

My, what nasty teeth they have: Corporate counsels rank the outside legal teams they'd least like to go up against.

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By Hilary Potkewitz

In the high-stakes world of corporate litigation, there are just a few law firms whose letterhead will make other attorneys nervous.

A recent survey of in-house counsel at about 250 U.S. corporations asked which law firms they see as the most formidable opponents, and predictably, a few names kept popping up. Less predictable was the slim showing for New York's big-name law firms.

Leading the pack were Kirkland & Ellis, **Quinn Emanuel Urquhart & Sullivan**, Lathan & Watkins and Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom, according to the September study released by legal research firm BTI Consulting Group.

This quartet, which BTI dubbed the “Fearsome Foursome”, enjoyed most-dreaded-opposing-counsel status among the corporate lawyers surveyed. Skadden Arps is the only Manhattan-based firm in the bunch.

While all four are well-respected firms whose names one would expect to see high up in any ranking, the list illustrates the changing legal marketplace, says Marcie Shunk, principal at BTI.

Litigation used to be a free-for-all, with cases dragging on for years and corporate legal budgets existing as a fuzzy estimate, because it was all about winning.

“The main concern of corporate counsels used to be, as long as I picked the firm with the best reputation, I can say that I made the best choice,” Ms. Shunk explained. And five years ago, she said, more New York firms would probably have featured more prominently on the list.

But reputation has expanded to include responsible financial decisions, efficiency, and ability to align with a client's goals—all of which encompass more than just winning. “Now there are a number of firms that have reputations in the eyes of clients that make them parallel to the traditional New York firms.”

The New York City Bar Association did not return calls for comment.

Most companies are looking to resolve cases quickly and minimize their legal spending. Lawyers in the survey reported resolving 20% of active cases so far in 2010, and said they intend to increase their out-of-court resolution rate to more than 30% for 2011.

“One of the things that we heard from clients is that if you have a law firm that makes the opponent think twice, you have a good chance of squelching the matter,” Ms. Shunk said.

In the land of corporate law, Machiavelli apparently still rules: It's better to be feared than loved. The study identified 28 other firms that corporate lawyers would rather not go up against, dubbing them the “Awesome Opponents.” The firms below that are headquartered in New York City are marked by an asterisk:

Ahmad Zavitsanos & Anaipakos
Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld
Alston & Bird
Bartlit Beck Herman Palenchar & Scott
*Boies Schiller & Flexner
Cooley
Fisher & Phillips
Fulbright & Jaworski
Gibson Dunn & Crutcher
Goodwin Procter
Greenberg Traurig
Haynes and Boone
Holland & Knight
Jenner & Block LLP
Jones Day, Lavin O'Neil Ricci Cedrone & DiSipio
Lynch Cox Gilman & Goodman
*Milberg
Morgan Lewis & Bockius
Munger Tolles & Olson
Patton Boggs
Sidley Austin
The Stanley Law Firm
Susman Godfrey
The Wolk Law Firm
Vinson & Elkins
*Wachtell Lipton Rosen & Katz
Williams & Connolly