

## A New Firm, A New Way to Practice Law

Lee Plave '83



Lee Plave '83 speaks with the exuberance of a man who has leapt off a building in the belief that he could fly and found out that he actually could. Plave walked away from a 20-year career as a big-firm lawyer, most recently as a partner at DLA Piper, the world's largest law firm. He, along with John Tifford, also

from DLA Piper, left to launch their own firm with David Koch, who came from Wiley, Rein & Fielding. Their new franchise law firm, Plave Koch PLC, started out as "the third-smallest in the world," Plave says, but grew fast. In fact, virtually all Plave's clients followed him to the new firm in Reston, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C.

"Before we launched, we were having lunch with a former colleague who asked whether we were jeopardizing our client relationships by making the change. Dave replied, 'No, we would jeopardize them by staying put.'"

Plave wanted to give his clients more—more service, more attention—while having the latitude to set fees more reasonably than would have been possible in a large firm. Plave describes his new firm as guided by simple principles that revolutionize the practice of law by changing the priority from hours, rates, and profit to client satisfaction, as well as changing the dynamic within the law firm from competition to collaboration. Instead of partners competing with each other for clients and compensation, he says, "every dollar that comes in is split among us." Because of that kind of profit sharing, partners feel very comfortable referring clients to partners who might have more expertise in a certain matter. Everyone comes out ahead, Plave says.

Instead of each hour invested in a client being considered "billable," Plave and his partners often visit clients to discuss and understand their businesses—be it Dunkin' Donuts, 7-Eleven, or Nathan's Famous hot dogs—in order to better represent them.

"It's part of our goal to get closer to our clients. We want to forge close relationships with them. Because we partners know each other very well, we trust one another to devote the time needed in order to learn about our clients and serve their needs and our goals in the long run."

The firm's Web site explains how Plave Koch views franchise law differently by calling their brand of it "Franchise Law with Zing." Zing is, in part, "cutting through the hype and bureaucracy (of large firms)" and "leaving clients with the elixir of excellent service at fair, reasonable, and predictable rates."

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Although launching a new firm after 20 years invested at another firm was a leap, it wasn't entirely a leap of faith. Plave and Koch had practiced together before, and spent several years planning the launch, shaking hands on the deal at a Washington Capitals hockey game.

"The biggest surprise was that there haven't been surprises," says Plave. "I wasn't sure if we would grow by two, three, five, seven, or ten. We have had to manage our growth in a controlled and sustained way." The firm grew from the original three to become a ten-partner firm; four new partners recently joined.

"We're more than just colleagues, we're friends. We grew not for the sake of growth, but because we all wanted to practice together."