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Law Firm Leaders: Kobre & Kim's Michael Kim

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Law360 (July 29, 2020, 12:51 PM EDT) -- Michael Kim co-founded disputes and investigations boutique law firm [Kobre & Kim](#) in 2003 alongside partner Steven Kobre.



Michael Kim
Kobre & Kim
co-founder

The firm launched as a two-lawyer operation in New York, and has since expanded to 13 offices across the globe.

Here, Kim speaks with Law360 about his goals for the law firm over the next five years, his strategy when it comes to recruiting attorneys, and his dream of meeting Martin Lipton, a founding partner of [Wachtell Lipton Rosen & Katz](#).

How has your law firm changed and evolved since you helped found it 17 years ago?

In some ways it's stayed the same in that we focus only on disputes and investigations and in particular disputes and investigations involving fraud and misconduct. In other ways it's fundamentally transformed because we started off as a two-person firm that did mostly criminal defense in New York. And now we do a whole range of different work across 13 offices in different parts of the world and a lot of it having to do with insolvency, asset recovery, financial litigation as well as crime and investigations. So, same core business, but it's kind of like the difference between an infant and a full-grown adult.

You said you started with two people. How many attorneys do you have now?

I think we have total, lawyers and financial analysts and other professionals, we have around 250 to 300. About half of them are lawyers and half are professionals in other areas.

What are your goals for the law firm over the next five years?

I think to grow as little as possible and keep specializing deeper in fraud and misconduct topics where clients have trouble finding lawyers with deep expertise. I guess it's the opposite of many law firms. My goal is to minimize size growth as much as possible and to maximize depth of expertise.

What is your strategy for attracting those people? How do you get them to join your firm?

I think by being as honest as possible up front. I think the issue with a lot of law firm recruitment is there is a whole recruiting machine whose sole goal is to try to make the firm appear to be whatever that recruit wants because they want a massive number of people. And of course some people get exactly what they think they'd get and others are very disappointed because things are not exactly as advertised. We probably recruit fewer than 20 new lawyers per year. For me it's about trying to figure out what they really want deep down. The number one thing I look for, aside from technical skills which is a given, is their priority in their career is to specialize even deeper in international fraud and misconduct cases.

We try to be really transparent up front and I hope by definition the only people who come are the people who want exactly what we have and we can deliver to them exactly what they want. That's the system I'm trying to create.

What are some challenges and opportunities right now in the disputes and investigations arena during the pandemic?

I think the disputes and investigations business has not been significantly impacted. I think the wave of new litigation that was expected to come from a wave of bankruptcies still has not materialized. At the same time in terms of difficulties that companies are having, the areas they have been cutting back on are perhaps more routine transactions and maybe routine litigation, but if you're in very specialized litigation that is very high stakes it has not really affected customer behavior in that area yet, either way.

The borders between countries after many years of being lowered and everything becoming globalized is now going in the reverse direction. So, you have a lot of sanctions, a lot of attempts by countries to try to weaken the companies of another country through investigations. So all that has really gone up quite a bit, especially between the U.S. and China.

What is your law firm doing to remain financially stable amid the pandemic?

I think the area we work in has not really been affected that deeply by the conditions. We really haven't had to do that many other things. Other than, everybody should be humble. This is a very difficult and complicated time. Just because things are going well now doesn't mean anything about what things could be like in six months. We're very focused on acquiring new business and not resting on our laurels and patting ourselves on the back, but trying to remain as insecure as possible and as hungry as possible.

Has your firm started going back to the office and what is your plan for navigating that?

We're in a lot of different countries and this is a very different issue depending on the country. Our U.S. offices and Brazil and Caribbean offices remain closed. The plan is to follow the government recommendations and prevailing industry practices in those markets. Our Asia offices are all fully open and operational. I'm in Korea right now. It kind of looks like the world was before the pandemic as a result of incredibly focused measures by the government and a lot of cooperation from the population. London is still closed. It's possible that could soon open up, but again it will have to be consistent with whatever the norms are in that country.

What one trait do you think is most important for a law firm partner?

I think emotional intelligence — the ability to understand what the client is thinking and feeling. Somebody who has a good memory or is able to process large amounts of information or has a personality trait where they work hard, all that stuff is already selected for by the whole law school, law firm training system. I'd say emotional intelligence is something that nothing in the entire process measures for. So I find lawyers have a very widely varying level of competence in that area. I think a certain amount of emotional intelligence can be developed, much like other types of competence. It's very hard to find, actually, among lawyers.

If you could have lunch with any well-known lawyer, alive or dead, who would it be? Why?

Probably Marty Lipton. Even though I don't know him I really admire what Wachtell Lipton did in a number of ways. I think they really ended up transforming parts of the legal industry. I think they encountered a lot of adversity in a time in New York legal practice that had a lot of anti-Jewish discrimination among the prevailing incumbent firms. And I think they innovated a practice area, mergers and acquisitions, from what it was — which was a fairly small niche practice area — to something they became leaders in and really revolutionized. If I could conjure him up to have lunch with me in Korea, that's what I would do.

--Editing by Rebecca Flanagan.

Correction: A previous version of this story misidentified the year Kobre & Kim was founded. The error has been corrected.

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