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I N C A M E R A

A photograph of four men in business suits standing in an office. The man on the far left is seated, while the other three are standing behind him. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows office windows with blinds and a plant.

Strength in Numbers

Adorno & Yoss continues to expand beyond its Florida roots.

By Wendy Davis

PHOTOS BY RUSS CURTIS

From left: George Yoss, Phil Guerra, Anthony Upshaw and Henry Adorno

Henry “Hank” Adorno is the first to admit that when he launched a law firm in 1986 with two other attorneys, he didn’t have much of a strategy in mind. He certainly never envisioned that by 2005, the Miami-based firm, now dubbed Adorno & Yoss, would grow to more

than 250 lawyers in 14 cities across the country.

“We started with no business plan — and no business,” says Adorno, who founded the firm several years after leaving the Florida state attorney general’s office, where he had been second in charge to Janet Reno. “Clearly our vision, if we had one, was to be a small litigation boutique.”

But, a two-year stint at MasTec, a Miami company that installs cables and satellite TV, gave Adorno other ideas. He returned to his firm in 1999 and drew up an ambitious five-year business plan

come about in the last two years through mergers and acquisitions.

Among the more notable: this February, Adorno & Yoss merged with 10-lawyer White & Wiggins of Dallas; in September 2004, the firm acquired the seven-lawyer Bryant Law Group of New York City; and in July 2004, Adorno & Yoss merged with 21-lawyer Alvarado Smith & Sanchez of Los Angeles.

Not only has the firm grown exponentially, but it also has leveraged both the political connections of its partners and its status as a minority-owned firm, to draw large corporate clients.

Revenues came in at around \$65 million last year and, says Adorno, the firm is on track for 10 percent to 15 percent growth this year. Ultimately, the goal is to establish an even larger national footprint, to be positioned to compete “on an equal footing” with firms in the Am Law 200.

Adorno & Yoss already is among the most politically connected law firms in Florida. George Yoss, the firm’s managing partner, worked closely with Adorno in the Florida attorney general’s office when Janet Reno was in charge.

The governmental links don’t end with the Clinton Administration’s Reno. In 2002, Governor Jeb Bush appointed former firm partner Raoul Cantero III, grandson of former Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, to Florida’s Supreme

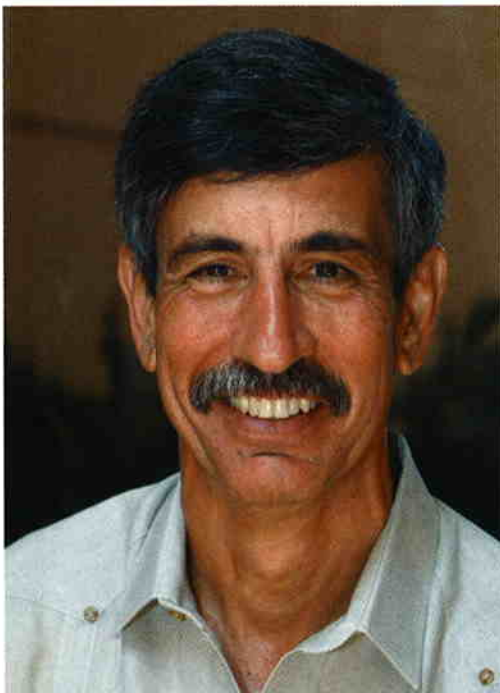
Court. Bush also tapped the firm to help privatize foster care in the state. When Adorno & Yoss opened a Tallahassee office, it did so by hiring the city’s mayor, John Robert Marks, III, as a partner.

Such entrenched contacts helped secure the firm’s reputation when clients needed representation before governmental bodies. That, in turn, ultimately led to an influx of corporate clients such as Allstate Insurance Company, Infinity Broadcasting Corporation and Lloyds of London, says litigation partner Anthony Upshaw.

“We’re active in all phases of politics — from local commissioners to the governor’s race,” says Upshaw, who represents tobacco giant R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company in products liability cases. “We just had a lot of connections, politically, which allowed us to represent different companies in front of city commissions and county commissions, which led to other work,” he says.

And, Upshaw adds, being minority-owned has been a big plus in the last several years, as corporate America has made more efforts to hire minority contractors. “The business case for hiring a diverse counsel has really taken hold with many corporations,” says Upshaw, with the firm since 1991.

“It’s the minority spin, if you will, that has opened up a unique niche for us,” adds Phil Guerra, the firm’s principal administrator for all non-legal matters, such as human resources, accounting and IT.



**Chief Executive Officer
Hank Adorno**

calling for massive expansion.

Since then, the firm has expanded to establish six offices in Florida. Adorno & Yoss also created a national presence through offices in cities including Atlanta, Dallas, Irvine, Kansas City, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C. Much of the out-of-state growth has

Of the firm's 23 "class A" shareholders — or equity partners — about one-third are African-American and one-third are Hispanic (that group is evenly divided between attorneys of Cuban and Mexican heritage, Adorno says). Only one is a woman, says Guerra.

Firmwide, 60 percent of the lawyers are white, 27 percent are Hispanic and 12 percent are African-American. Fifty-three percent are male and 47 percent are female.

Adorno & Yoss boasts it's the largest minority-owned firm certified by the National Minority Supplier Development Council — a business membership organization that links its member corporations with minority-owned businesses. But rapid expansion has presented a new set of challenges for the firm.



Managing Partner George Yoss

Each new office must be assimilated, which means that lawyers in once-independent firms have to change how

they do everything from making a telephone call to issuing a bill. The process hasn't always been easy.

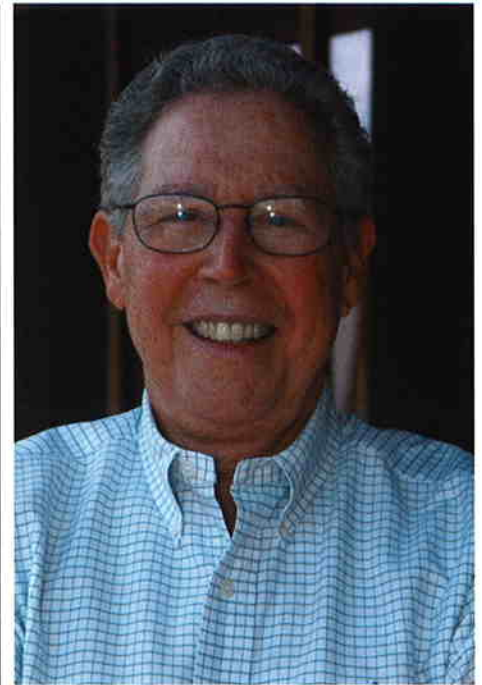
For instance, three years ago the firm moved to a CMS Open e-billing system, but some of the more technophobic attorneys aren't yet on board. "It requires you to be able to use a computer," Adorno says, adding that the firm's older generation of lawyers — generally those older than 60 — have resisted. Adorno & Yoss also is attempting to go "paperless," which has presented challenges for those attorneys who don't like computers.

Having opened offices nationwide, the next item on the agenda is firmwide consolidation and integration, Adorno says. One priority is to somehow bring together all of the lawyers with the same specialty so that they start functioning like one cohesive unit. "We're trying to work really hard at developing national practice groups," Adorno says. The goal for now is to hold monthly meetings, either through video or telephone conferencing.

The firm also intends to grow its smaller satellite offices organically, so that each is capable of providing a full array of services. The Atlanta office has so far grown from three attorneys in May 2004 to 15 today. "Theoretically, there's no advantage to having a three-lawyer office anywhere," Adorno says. Clients who want one-stop shopping, will need branch offices that are staffed with enough lawyers to handle the major practice areas.

Adorno & Yoss upgraded its own computer systems several years ago, in preparation for expansion. As of now, Adorno says, the telephone systems are uniform in about 70 percent of the offices.

"Integration is a journey, not a destination," Adorno jokes. Some attorneys have their own methods and are resistant to change anything. "You can



Administrator Phil Guerra

put systems in place, or whatever," he says. "But it's very hard with professional services to say, 'Here's the book. Do it by the book.'"

Still, it's clear the firm keeps tight control on its far-flung attorneys. "Democracy does not work in the corporate world," Adorno says.

Managing partner George Yoss makes day-to-day decisions for the firm, in consultation with one administrative partner per office who reports to him. In addition to weighing in on new matters, including whether to take on additional work for existing clients, Yoss sets compensation for every attorney in the firm except himself. (His salary is determined by the firm's executive committee.) Yoss determines paychecks by looking at a variety of factors including hours worked, business brought in, pro bono work and other contributions.

"We do not use a formula," Yoss says. "We use what we have always called from the beginning 'rough justice.'"

Rough justice, a model used by other firms as well, is the opposite of a lockstep

system, in which pay is based on seniority. At Adorno & Yoss, even associate pay is determined on a case-by-case basis. "In our shop, you can be a first-year lawyer and if you perform or exceed expectations, you can make more than a seventh-year lawyer," Adorno says. Yoss adds that associate pay will also depend on what department an attorney works in, with some practice areas commanding higher client rates than others.

The firm remains small enough that Yoss believes he can evaluate how deserving individual attorneys are. "I know who works late," he says. "I know who I can call on Saturday morning, and they're going to be sitting at their desk."

When Yoss meets with attorneys to tell them their salaries, many of them, not surprisingly, tell him they disagree with his assessment.

"Lawyers have good oratory skills," says Yoss. "They like to debate. They like to argue. And there's nothing more that they like to debate and argue over than their worth."

Yoss says he hears the lawyers out and



Partner Anthony Upshaw

ends up revising compensation upwards in about one out of 10 cases. The other nine resign themselves to his decision. "For the most part they understand," Yoss says. "They just always think they should get more out of the pie."

Still, one equity partner left this year as a result of his salary review. A former name

partner, Jon Zeder, also left the firm in 2002. At the time, he praised his new firm for what *The Miami Herald* called a "cohesive culture, which concentrates less on billable hours and more on a team approach to servicing clients."

Adorno maintains that the split with Zeder was amicable.

While only a handful of elite firms still compensate partners on a lockstep model, a number of large firms pay associates based on seniority. When asked whether he thinks that paying based on seniority promotes collegiality, Adorno responds: "I personally wouldn't like that." He adds, "There's nothing wrong with collegiality, but this is a business." **LI**

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