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## CAPITAL BUSINESS

### Boutique law firm strives to stay small, successful



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Unlike some others, I'm at ease when I walk through the serene hallways at Zuckerman Spaeder, 10 floors above one of Washington's busiest intersections.

I am here for an interview.

Most people are in trouble when they come to see the hired guns in this boutique law firm. Clients bleed big money to clean up those messes, up to \$1,000 an hour.

"We represent people and companies who are often in the worst situations of their lives," said Roger Zuckerman, 73, a founding partner and elder statesman who wants to see his creation live on.

Call it high-performance litigation.

The firm's past cases are right out of the headlines: Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former International Monetary Fund chief caught up in financial and sex scandals. Alan Cranston, the late U.S. senator from California who was dubbed one of the Keating Five. Former Internal Revenue Service official Lois Lerner. AOL. Enron. The Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. White-water. NFL concussions. Massey Energy's Don Blankenship. Columbia/HCA. Refco. Fannie Mae. Freddie Mac.

Zuckerman Spaeder's 100 lawyers, 30 of whom are partners, have thrived as independent troubleshooters when many contemporaries were getting gobbled up by Big Law.

"The remarkable thing about Zuckerman Spaeder is that we are still alive," said William W. Taylor, a founding partner whose bluntness contrasts with co-founder Zuckerman's lyrical verbosity.

As the firm celebrates its 40th anniversary, it faces challenges in an industry racked by turmoil.

Smaller firms, even some large ones, have



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**Dwight Bostwick, left, is the new chairman of Zuckerman Spaeder. Bostwick is an eight-year veteran of the law firm started by Roger Zuckerman, right, and several others in the 1970s.**

been dying off. Many law partnerships have gone into consolidation mode, with 1,000-lawyer firms putting offices around the globe and offering one-stop shopping for a variety of legal services.

In a world of generalists, "we try to be good at one thing," said Dwight Bostwick, the firm's new chairman. The responsibility for ensuring the continuum of Zuckerman Spaeder's way of life — smallish, specialized, highly profitable — has fallen to Bostwick. At 55, he is an eight-year veteran of the firm.

Bostwick's job is a balancing act. He must tend to the million and one details that go with running a multimillion-dollar busi-

ness with nearly 200 employees across four offices in Tampa, Baltimore, New York and Washington.

He must also keep the peace so the talent can do its thing. That means hiring well and keeping jerks — no matter how talented — out of the mix. The firm, like others that flourish, lives on its case flow.

"Winning is important," said Taylor, who last month won a big victory for former coal executive Blankenship, who faced felony charges related to a mining tragedy and was convicted of just a misdemeanor. He is appealing.

"The next trick is to carry this into the next generation," Taylor said. "All of us

older guys are going to die soon.”

You win, you get more cases. You make more money. And Zuckerman Spaeder makes money. Lots. Its profit-per-partner, a key metric, is more than \$1 million.

“Your goal is to handle the cases that are entrusted to you in an effective and profitable way and in a way that will cause the people who sent them to you to send others,” Taylor said.

Zuckerman Spaeder does not have the luxury of big corporate clients delivering annual seven-figure retainers to swat flies and keep them out of the muck.

“Most boutique law firms that do one thing very, very well are created around very charismatic, excellent individuals,” Bostwick said. “The challenge in those environments is to keep a team-oriented spirit and bring to the fore the younger generation.”

Translation: Don’t mess it up.

Its bench is deep and filled with people in their 40s and 50s who cut their teeth helping the Taylors and Zuckermans succeed.

“We’re ready to put our own stamp on the place,” said Caroline Judge Mehta, a partner and rising star in the white-collar-crime practice.

The cases have been coming since the 1970s, when two Rogers, Zuckerman and Spaeder, and Taylor and some other hungry local prosecutors and public defenders decided to pool their talents.

“We started from scratch,” Zuckerman said. “It was not premeditated.”

The legal market in the 1970s was in a period of growth, with a demand for so-

phisticated trial and legal services from good lawyers. It was fertile territory, breeding such local legal legends as Tom Green, Jim Sharp, Earl Silbert, Bob Bennett, Brendan Sullivan, Richard Hibey, John Dowd. And Taylor and Zuckerman.

Zuckerman and his fellow lawyers “figured out the right formula. We figured out the values we needed to develop this firm. It was intuitive.”

They took on difficult cases, sometimes defending other law firms on professional liability issues, a sector that some firms will not touch.

They grew, adding offices in Florida, which became a money maker. They opened in Baltimore. Then New York. They began trying cases around the country, getting their name out.

Courts, particularly federal judges, were increasingly willing to entertain limited appearances of lawyers from other jurisdictions. It helped Zuckerman Spaeder’s visibility.

So did cases with big names. They worked alongside, and sometimes for, the major legal players of the day: Alan Dershowitz. F. Lee Bailey. Leonard B. Boudin.

Zuckerman Spaeder “carefully fashioned a strategic approach to client problem-solving,” said Mark Tuohey, a local white-collar lawyer and now counsel to D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser.

As it reaches its tipping point, the firm has matured into a smaller version of its chief cross-town rival: Williams & Connolly. Part of the magic to keep it going is keeping its hiring highly selective.

“We are very careful,” Zuckerman said.

“It’s not only brains that get you in. It is style and personality in a way that’s decent and accommodating.”

As a member of the trial bar, it is no surprise Zuckerman Spaeder is knee-deep in Democrats, although it does not have a political action committee. Indeed, several of its former lawyers accepted big jobs in the Obama administration, including ambassadorships and posts in the office of the White House counsel.

Politics, of course, makes its way into the “funky culture.” Holiday parties include lip-synchs and political skits imitating Hillary Clinton, George W. Bush and others.

As I turn a corner on my way out of the firm, Zuckerman greets me, clad in jeans, loafers and a scarf wrapped over an expensive-looking sport coat that he swears is 20 years old.

The co-founder is off to a luncheon meeting, leaving some of the heavy lifting to the Dwight Bostwicks and Caroline Judge Mehtas of the world.

So he really is stepping back and letting the youngsters move ahead?

“It’s very important,” Zuckerman had said, lecturing me as if I were a juror on one of his cases. “You’ve got to understand that those who were founders have willingly adopted the George Washington pose and moved gracefully to the rear of the bus, and let other people drive the bus. Not grudgingly, but with great pleasure and pride.”

He acknowledges that he just used a mixed metaphor, but what the heck. It works.

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