Not Speed Dating: Firms With New Shingles Looking to Mingle

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Bilzin Sumberg Baena Price & Axelrod recently hosted a “Waffle Wednesday” at its new space at Pipeline Brickell, hiring a chef to serve up tasty waffles to the firm’s office mates, like SkyBank Financial, Italian design firm Pininfarina and The Founder’s Institute, the world’s largest startup accelerator.

For Bilzin, the tiny outpost provides an opportunity for the firm to rub elbows with—and hopefully attract as clients—some of Miami’s new entrepreneurial startups, and just maybe, the next Google or Microsoft.

Bilzin’s not alone.

In Miami and elsewhere in the country, law firms are opening outposts in entrepreneurial hubs, medical office parks or university centers, away from their high-rise downtown office towers.

Their supposition: that these young turks are more comfortable doing business with lawyers on their own turf rather than driving to a stuffy downtown law office, and that by developing casual relationships with them, they may secure a new generation and class of clients.

The potential new clientele is not inconsiderable.

Dubbed Silicon Beach, Miami is considered one of the hot spots for start-ups, with some 1,600 documented tech start-ups in South Florida, according to Alex de Carvalho, president of the Miami Social Media Club and a Pipeline tenant.

Various shared-space incubators geared to entrepreneurs have popped up throughout Miami. One is Pipeline, where Google, Apple and Uber have leased space. Another is LAB Miami in Wynwood, where Akerman has an outpost.

In 2013, Akerman became the first law firm to lease space at LAB Miami, securing an office for six to 10 lawyers on rotation. The space is funky and hip, with a huge mural of a cartoonish character named Louis painting to the project logo, “Akerman In.”

Akerman leveraged the firm’s corporate, intellectual property and real estate practices rotate through the office, which is led by 31-year-old Andrew Pompa, who is based there.

Akerman has held seminars and workshops for young entrepreneurs at the LAB, teaching them how to avoid IP pitfalls and obtain startup financing.

When it first opened, LAB co-founder Wilfredo Fernandez said he was surprised a big corporate law firm would be interested in space at the LAB but soon understood the benefit.

“These aren’t just some corporate guys coming here to work,” he said. “We all know that for entrepreneurs, having really good counsel can ensure that your startup is successful.”

The goal of the office is not necessarily business development, insists Pompa. Rather, “it’s to become part of the community,” he said.

“Our vision is very different from other firms, which make does being there full-time necessary,” he said. “We are finding ways to explore synergies and work together. These are people we were not going to bump into downtown. They’re not in suits and ties, they don’t go to galas. This is not speed dating.”

The space also provides a recruiting and retention tool for Akerman attorneys, who fight to rotate through it, Pompa added.

Bilzin leased a tiny space at Pipeline Brickell this past summer, which one to three Bilzin lawyers rotate through weekly.

To introduce itself to other tenants, Bilzin has held three social events so far: a happy hour, the waffle Wednesday and a Labor Day networking party.

“We didn’t just decide to put our shingle somewhere because it was the ‘in’ thing to do,’” noted Al Dotson, a Bilzin practice leader. “Being in these spaces allows us to directly interact with some of our startup or emerging business entrepreneurs.”

Andrew Pompa, Director, Akerman in office.

Still, Kent Zimmermann, a law firm consultant with Zenghiser Group in Chicago, said law firms have recently begun opening outposts in high-tech areas of the country—such as Silicon Alley in New York and Silicon Prairie in Chicago—in an attempt to snag entrepreneurial clients.

“It’s a trend I’ve seen in markets where there are emerging economy sectors,” he said. “The idea is if you build a relationship early on with the new Google or Microsoft, that will pay off.”

Additionally, Zimmermann said, these outposts can be recruiting tools luring young lawyers to the firm.

“It’s attractive to millennials,” he said. “It’s a recruiting play. It’s a smart and low investment for the firm all around.”

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