

Law Firm Design: A Focus on Image and Functionality

If your office color scheme is more institutional than inspiring, or your furniture is older than most of your associates, it may be time to consider redecorating.

As a firm tries to woo young associates, its office can give either a fantastic –or flawed – first impression. (And, of course, clients could notice that rip in the reception area couch, too.)

“Law firm design is a two-part situation – image and functional design,” says Anne Kniffen, Managing Principal of Dallas-based lauckgroup, an interior architecture design firm that specializes in legal office interiors. “Many firms sign long leases, and when the leases come up, they comment that the office ‘no longer works.’ ”

The next step? Determine how the firm has changed. If the demographic has shifted younger, a firm may have different space and amenity needs.

“Young attorneys don’t care about having a big office,” Kniffen said. “They want an office that works – the right lighting, room to spread out and plug in their laptops, ergonomic chairs.”

ONE-STOP SHOPPING

Lawyers work long hours, so comfort is key. Some firms, like Clifford Chance, which has 27 offices worldwide, offer employees several in-house amenities to make life a little easier.

When Clifford Chance moved its London office to a new Canary Wharf facility in 2003, attorneys gained access to a staff restaurant, on-site gym, swimming pool, squash courts, and a shop offering dry cleaning and postal services. The facility also features a hair salon, juice bar, and a coffee lounge that becomes a bar on Thursday and Friday nights.

A spokesperson for Clifford Chance noted that the new office was designed around the firm’s belief “that the quality of our office environments is critical to the well-being of our lawyers and business services staff.”

Firm-sponsored services are a growing trend. “Many firms provide a dry cleaner to pick up clothes, a wide spectrum of snacks, or cater nice food in,” Kniffen said. “Some even have late-shift word processing help on staff.”

IMAGE IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

Other firms find their redesign needs are primarily technological. When Lewis and Roca LLP, with 170 attorneys and offices in five cities, redid its Phoenix office in 2005, each conference room was upgraded to include high-definition plasma-screen televisions with computer and teleconferencing outlets.

Office light fixtures, carpeting, and furniture were changed to complement the new technology.

“We have a fabulous space, but it needed to be updated,” said Jane Reddin, a former partner at Lewis and Roca. “We wanted something that would make a statement about our firm.”

Lewis and Roca’s library also received a facelift.

“When the space was first built out, we had one of the largest law libraries in the state,” Reddin said. “But with technology being what it is now, we didn’t need more room for books; we needed a space that allowed more technology.”

NEW OFFICE, NEW STANDARD

Yet, even with today’s technology, paper storage is still a major issue for many firms. Reducing the leased square footage to cut costs is another common redesign goal.

Each firm should approach its renovation by determining its big-picture goal – which, in addition to storage, size, and amenities, in most cases will involve making the office more relaxing, Kniffen says.

“There was a period where law firms really tried to impress clients – [using] more crown molding, dark wood, chandeliers,” she said. “As time marches on, they are toning down offices. They don’t want it to look like their clients are paying for it. They want to have a comfortable, professional environment.”

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