

TOP NORTHERN CALIFORNIA LAW FIRMS

MANAGING PARTNER A-LIST

By Amelia Hansen

Daily Journal Staff Writer

DJ: What was the biggest challenge you faced last year?

Roos: Obviously with the world downturn, the economy is challenging for everyone. I think the biggest challenge that we face as a law firm — given the incredibly challenging times that our client base is going through — is staying close to the client. At Wilson Sonsini we've always really prided ourselves on the fact that we were more than just a legal advisor, that we're business partners to our clients. We've always said that we ride with our clients through the ups and the downs.

From an internal perspective, I've always believed that 99 percent of the game is communication. People in law firms are smart, they're talented. If you're honest, straightforward and communicate a lot, there's a lot of things that you can do — even if they're painful things — and people will understand. Again, in the difficult times that's when communication becomes that much more important.

DJ: What is your biggest challenge going forward? What are you doing to guide your firm through the stormy economy?

Roos: One of the immediate things we did in '09 — again with the idea of being the business partner to the client — is that we did not increase our rates. As a result, we're spending a lot of time emphasizing ways to become more efficient in providing the legal services. At the very beginning of last year — we didn't wait until September when there was a crash — we saw signs of softening of the legal market. We put in place hiring freezes, stricter expense control, the type of thing that was designed to, you know, get ahead of the curve. Now, no firm was totally ahead of the curve. I don't think anyone saw the extent of the recession that we're in.

DJ: What is your biggest accomplishment or what are you the most proud of?

Roos: My wife and children. When you're running a firm, you have to have a very sympathetic family and they've been great. I have two kids, one is a 21-year-old senior in college, the other one is a 16-year-old junior. My wife's a lawyer so she understands.

One of the things I'm very proud of is that we created this whole alumni network. Once about every six months we invite all Wilson Sonsini



JOHN ROOS

WILSON SONSINI
GOODRICH & ROSATI,
Palo Alto

John Roos, 54, is the chief executive officer of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati in Palo Alto and a member of the firm's board of directors. Roos, who took on the CEO role in 2005, became a partner at the firm in 1988 and has a corporate finance practice.

S. TODD ROGERS

alumni to get together. Your first law firm, in a way, is like your freshman dorm. You make lifelong friends. Obviously, it has positive business implications because people go out and do things. They join clients and companies. But you go to these things and even attorneys who have gone to competitors still feel an incredible bond.

I'm also proud of the fact we've been able to ... we have a phenomenal first generation at this firm. We're making the transition to the next generation. The first generation is obviously critical and continues to be critical to the future of the firm. But I think the important thing we've all done together is to make that generational shift. Most great firms are started by and dominated by one, two or three of that first generation. Then the key is, can the firm make the shift to the next generation? I give a lot of credit to Larry Sonsini and the first generation for recognizing the importance of that.

It's really all about — it's kind of like the economy — it's all about confidence, confidence in the team and there's a whole team of us running the firm now. You know, we just did a layoff. One of the things that Larry Sonsini and I did was, we did a whole series of town hall meetings. Larry spent a lot of time talking about the vision of the firm, the overall economy and where our business model fits in with the economy. I spent a lot of time talking about the client base, the strength of the client base, the internal workings of the firm, how we made the decision that we made, why we

made the decision that we made.

DJ: Have you made any mistakes in your time running the firm?

Roos: Yeah, of course we all make mistakes. The last president is the only one I know that never made a mistake. I feel the mistakes I make are making decisions prior to touching all the necessary bases. I always get back to the communication. When you're rushed to do something and you make a decision before you've had the opportunity to really bring people into the loop and really explain everything, that's when you make mistakes.

Now I will tell you the other mistake you can make and I've done it. At a certain point in time you have to make the decision and move on. Lawyers and law firms will debate issues forever and sometimes in the quest for communication and input you let a decision go on too long. The correct balance is making sure that everyone has been heard, not only heard but taking into consideration their views, and then moving on.

DJ: Do you have any inspirations or models for your leadership?

Roos: I am inspired by a lot of things in life. I should have saved the wife and the kids for this one. Two leaders I greatly admire: Barack Obama and John Kennedy, both of whom follow the words Kennedy once said: "There are risks and costs to action. But they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction."