

# The personal touch

## India

### FoxMandal Little

**Two of the oldest names in India joined forces in 2006 to form the country's largest law firm, driven by a dedication to personalized care and top-level customer service. And FoxMandal Little has committed to preserve and advance these venerable traditions**

The 21st century world can seem quite harsh and unwelcoming at times. Modern business practices result in longer working hours and the latest communication methods mean that quite often an entire business relationship, from introduction to signed and sealed conclusion, can take place without the two parties ever meeting. It's therefore reassuring to find a firm that still places a great deal of importance on personalized care.

"The most basic thing we do is to ensure that every client, no matter how big or small, gets the personal attention of a partner for every transaction they have with the firm," says Shuva Mandal, FoxMandal Little's managing partner for Southern India and great-grandson of the firm's co-founder. "We feel that it's not the client's size that is the important thing, but the strength of the relationship that you develop with them. That is really critical for the firm and always has been – it's one of the reasons we've been successful for over 110 years."

Success has indeed followed FoxMandal Little's approach to business. It is one of India's oldest full-service law firms, tracing its origins to Calcutta in 1896, when Messrs Fox and Mandal established one of the first Indo-British law firms. While it rapidly became a major player in the market, geographical expansion came relatively recently, with a New Delhi office established in 1984.

Following a sustained period of success in New Delhi, the mid to late 1990s saw a flurry of new openings in areas such as Bangalore and Hyderabad. A merger in 2006 with Little & Co, another of India's most prestigious legal practices, created the largest firm in the country.

Despite this recent growth, the focus on personal care has never wavered. "We still give a very personalized care, with a partner involved in each and every transaction, even if most of the work is being done in another office," says Ravi Bishnoi, a senior partner in the firm's infrastructure practice. "For instance, if one of my clients in Delhi has some assignment that needs doing in the south, I will brief our southern office on the assignment and the level of service he requires. Then, although most of the work that is done on that particular transaction will take place in the southern office, I will still be kept in the loop and take responsibility for the overall relationship with that client."

#### A team approach

While a partner is involved in every instance, he or she will also appoint a team made up of other partners (if required) and a number of senior associates and associates, depending on the size and nature of the transaction. Throughout the process, the original partner will stay in contact with the entire team and will ensure that the client is fully apprised of what is going on at all times.

"Our youngest associates usually have two or three years of experience before they join the firm and have all been groomed to some extent," says Bishnoi. "The other important aspect is that, in the New Delhi office in particular, almost all of the associates have LL.M.s from leading overseas law schools"

The firm also offers both foreign students and lawyers a chance to take part in intern programmes at the firm. The first such scheme is open to foreign law or management students and offers a three-month internship. The second is for young lawyers from foreign countries, with two to three years' experience, wanting to spend three to six months in any of the firm's offices in India. The third, meanwhile, is for in-house counsel in foreign companies who do, or wish to do, business in India.

Below:  
Shuva Mandal

Opposite page  
Near right:  
Ravi Bishnoi

Far right:  
Som Mandal

The opportunities these programmes present are apparent, as the close relationship between the partners and the associates working with them allows the younger lawyers to observe how their more experienced colleagues handle clients and gives them a good grounding in the firm's traditions of client care.

To back this up, there are regular in-house meetings for associates and senior associates every Saturday. In addition to allowing for an exchange of the latest legal information, these get-togethers address the general principles of client handling and the way the firm is developing.

"We find these meetings very useful, as do our associates," says Vineet Aneja, head of the firm's corporate

practice. "But as every transaction is partner led, the way that the client and the transaction are handled is ultimately decided by the partner and passed down to his team."

The partner will also make sure that all other goals are met, such as the strict adherence to timelines, with some sort of response to client queries required within 24 hours whenever possible. But the firm also likes to go that little bit further than one might expect.

"On the whole, the client wants prompt and quality service," continues Aneja. "What we try and do when a client comes to us with a query is not just to go back with a 'yes or no' answer. I will try to go out of my way to give some alternatives, some better options that the client may not have thought about in the first place. It's this sort of outside-of-the-box thinking that can be most helpful when dealing with certain transactions."

#### Keeping up to date

In order to be of most use to clients in this respect, the firm likes to stay in touch with the latest developments in the economy and commerce. One area that is growing rapidly in India is the IT sector, and in response FoxMandal Little has opened a new practice group to ensure it keeps up to speed.

"IT is an area that is developing really fast," says Bishnoi. "A new act has come into place, so there's a lot of activity on that front. It is very important to stay at the forefront of business developments; that is why we have formed a specialist team to deal with IT."

Staying on top of things in India is no easy task, as it is currently one of the world's fastest-growing economies and is seeing an ever-increasing amount of foreign investment. Unsurprisingly, therefore, on the corporate side of the business around 80% of the firm's clients are from outside India, and here once again the firm is happy to use its local knowledge to go that extra mile to help its clients whenever possible. What's more, it sees this as an increasingly vital part of its client service remit.

"We don't advise only on legal aspects," says Aneja. "As corporate lawyers, we like to see ourselves as business advisers rather than just providers of legal information.



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We can help out using our knowledge of the commercial and cultural environment in India.

“Because India is such a rapidly growing economy, five or six years ago the business climate was very different and there were a limited number of corporate lawyers for people to go to. Now, the number of firms is increasing on an almost daily basis, meaning there is increased competition and everyone has to pay much more attention to client care.”

And competition could soon be ratcheted up even further as, according to Bishnoi, it may not be too long before the market finally opens up to foreign law firms – and FoxMandal Little finds itself standing alone in favour of such a move.



#### Broadening the market

“I don't think we are very far away from the time that foreign law firms will be allowed to open offices in India,” he claims. “We have to gear up for that because it will provide some very stiff competition. The government is working towards a liberalization of the laws and we are the only large law firm that is supporting this, because we believe in healthy competition. In fact, we have made presentations to the law ministries and the various departments within the government, and presented papers putting the case forward. There is opposition from the other law firms in the country, but I imagine it's only a matter of time. Competition can only be a good thing for the market.”

It's possible that when the law is relaxed to allow foreign firms, the Indian Bar Council may see its way clear to relaxing the country's strict marketing limitations, which have stood for around 100 years. These mean that absolutely no advertising is allowed, so the firm has to rely on more traditional methods of marketing itself.

“This is one of the reasons client care is so important to us,” says Aneja. “Word of mouth is one of the most important ways we can attract new clients. The work we get through client recommendations makes us very proud; on occasion, we have even been hired by firms we have acted against in the past.”

Of course, the firm's partners also attend and speak at conferences and seminars both throughout India and around the globe, which not only keeps their own legal knowledge up to date, but also helps keep the firm profile at eye level.

“As well as attending external seminars and conferences, the firm also tries to organize open in-house seminars every month. We try and get distinguished speakers and invite our clients to them,” Aneja elaborates. “In addition, we produce newsletters to update clients on the recent legal developments, political changes and any other news we think will be of interest.”

#### The written word

Perhaps the most noteworthy publication in the FoxMandal stable is *Investing in India*, an annually updated book that

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aims to serve as an introduction for individuals or companies considering a business move into the country.

"The main thrust of the book is a guide on how to invest in the various sectors of the Indian market," explains Bishnoi. "It goes through the basic entities you can set up and introduces the different regulatory bodies. It gives the client a very useful overview of the various aspects of investing in India he needs to know about, so he will be pre-armed for any preliminary meetings."

As well as being reviewed each year, the firm's newsletters report on any changes that have taken place over the year. The book has proved so popular that it is now being targeted for a more widespread distribution and has been translated into a number of languages, including Chinese and Korean.

In addition to providing all of these extra services, the firm realizes that one of the most important aspects of any client care programme is to make sure that the client is both aware of, and happy with, all the work being done on its behalf.

"We make sure that we maintain regular contact with the client to get feedback about the type of service it is getting," says Shuva Mandal. "Some clients want things a



Left:  
Vineet Aneja

little more wrapped up or to be shown a little more care, while others prefer a looser relationship."

The firm also holds functions for its clients, including regular outings to an art gallery in New Delhi that it sponsors.

"We support the gallery and hold shows about four times a year to promote up-and-coming artists," says Bishnoi. "It's an excellent, and slightly different, way to stay in touch with our clients."

This personal attention to its clients helps ensure that FoxMandal Little stays ahead of the game in the client care stakes and perhaps it is no surprise that it has been selected for a Client Choice Award; but as Bishnoi points out, the firm plans to continue to improve and impress, and must remain guarded against complacency.

"The most important thing about winning these awards is retaining them," he says. "Clients remember these things and it makes us very proud."

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