

# Lights, camera, legal action

## New Zealand

### Simpson Grierson

**Simpson Grierson's radical approach to marketing is inextricably intertwined with its client care policy and has earned the firm a reputation as something of an innovator in its field**

Hollywood has never been overly kind to the legal profession. With the exception of the odd John Grisham dramatization, movie lawyers tend to be played by the Sean Penns of this world rather than the Sean Connerys. Be they tempted by the devil (or the devil themselves), corrupted by the Mob or in the pay of some power-crazed political hopeful, the movie industry rarely paints advocates in a pleasing light.

But New Zealand law firm Simpson Grierson has nothing but praise for Tinseltown, having carved a niche for itself representing most of the major studios on what have become some of the most filmed islands in the southern hemisphere.

“We act for people like the producers of *Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Last Samurai*,” says Greg Towers, a partner in the firm’s Auckland office and head of the resources and infrastructure department. He goes on to point out that the firm has used its Hollywood connections as part of its radical marketing campaigns, in which Simpson Grierson is far from backward about coming forwards.

“We have taken quite a revolutionary marketing position,” he explains. “We have taken full, 40-foot billboards around the business area of town and at the airport. In the very first we had one of our partners dressed up in black tie, looking very Jack Nicholson, and another dressed in 1920s flapper gear to portray to the whole country our involvement in the movie industry. A lot of

films are made here because of the favourable economic conditions for filmmakers and just about the only big studio we don’t represent is Disney.”

This aggressive approach to marketing fits in with what Towers believes is the firm’s perceived image in New Zealand, that of the new boys on the block. As the youngest of the ‘Big Four’ firms in the country, it enjoys its position as a relative newcomer.

“The name Simpson Grierson only came into being in 1983 and our major merger occurred in 1985,” says Towers. “There were obviously predecessor firms, but we really got started a little later than the other three. I think – without wanting to be disparaging to them, because they are very good firms – that they are regarded as being a bit staid and we are a bit more innovative in what we do and in our approach to our clients. This includes how we market ourselves, how we adopt systems and how we embrace new technology – we are still the only Big Four firm to use BlackBerrys.”

#### Marketing guru

This innovative approach to business and to marketing in particular can perhaps be traced back to the late 1980s, when the firm was the first in New Zealand to appoint a full-time marketing director in the shape of the highly respected, US-born marketing pioneer Professor Steve Bridges.

“This really was a key moment for the firm,” says another Auckland partner and former board member, Peter Stubbs. “He brought all of the disciplines and structural focus that you would expect from someone with both a corporate and academic background. He taught us that marketing is not just a department that’s two doors down on the right, but that it forms the very fabric of our offering. Bridges’ view was that marketing is all about meeting and exceeding client expectations. Seen in those terms, marketing is client care.”

To illustrate this point, one of the first things that Bridges did when he came to Simpson Grierson was to move the client parking spaces in the firm car park closest to the front door, in place of the partners’ which were there previously.

# New Zealand

Left:  
Denis McNamara



“Now that’s not rocket science,” points out Towers. “But it shows you are putting your clients ahead of your own interests. We are now in the newest high-rise building in the city and occupy the top half of it, and of course our clients have their own floor of parking spaces, right near the front door.”

Another innovative idea which the firm uses both to market itself and to serve its clients is its flagship publication, *Source Magazine*. Rather than confine its legal bulletins and case histories to the traditional newsletters, Simpson Grierson decided that it would produce a glossy magazine.

“We decided to move away from boring legal publications that just told people about changes to the Rating Powers Act,” says Towers. “We put all of our news into a magazine that profiles our clients as well as the firm. In one issue we had a picture of one of our partners in a BP forecourt uniform talking about the new motorway service station they had just opened. We write the articles and the client signs off on them. There’s other things like recipes and general interest articles. We get a lot of favourable comments and it’s the sort of thing you hang onto rather than read and throw away.”

While the introduction of Bridges’ ideas may have helped the firm become more inventive in terms of its marketing and client care initiatives, there is a limit to how much marketing alone can help a firm’s client care policy, admits Stubbs.

“I think, and this is only a personal view, that one of the things law firms have been struggling with for some time is the appropriate role for their marketing department,” he says. “Based on my observations over the last 20 years, there is a significant role for them to play in terms of being able to put in place processes and systems that allow a much more uniform and standardized and structured approach to client service. They can also get involved in the brand work and the development of brand architecture to ensure that the values and attributes of an organization are well conveyed.

“Fundamentally, however, the issue of actually developing and taking care of business can be supported and facilitated by marketing, but at the end of the day that

responsibility has to fall to the people who have the day-to-day relationships with clients and the contacts.”

## A caring history

It is therefore fortunate for Simpson Grierson that, according to one of its older statesmen, the general ethos of the firm has always been a caring one, with a focus on client service.

“When I first started, we were a medium-sized firm with a very caring culture centred on making the place a nice place to work, as well as doing quality work and looking after the clients,” recalls Denis McNamara, a partner in the Auckland office who has been with the firm since 1969. “In those 40-odd years, we’ve been through various economic cycles and we haven’t put returns to the partners as our top priority. It’s been more a philosophy of look after the clients and the rewards will follow, rather than look after the rewards and hope you’ve got some clients left.

“The engagement of a professional like Steve Bridges was really a natural progression for the firm. When I first joined the firm we were probably – all told, including the tea lady – 25 people, and I suppose we are now one of the largest firms in New Zealand. But it’s the same culture of saying, ‘Okay, how do we do things better? Let’s get the right people in to tell us’ – not relying on gut reactions. We’ve been prepared to adapt to change and to ideas that were presented by a variety of different people over the years to improve the whole operation, but I think the culture actually started first. We could have looked at it at the time, as a number of our competitors did do, and said, ‘No we won’t spend the money – we’ll just put it in our pocket and buy fancy cars’.”

When a firm has spent so long and invested so much in a culture of client care it can become second nature, and McNamara sees the important aspect of this element of the job as being the cultivation of personal relationships with the clients.

“It’s about knowing the clients and looking after them on a personal basis,” he says. “It comes through in a number of different ways. I recently saw a client of mine in Hong Kong who’s in his late 80s now and he still

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remembers the time many years ago when he was in New Zealand and came to my house. The business side of that trip wasn't that great for him, but it obviously meant a lot to him that we didn't just leave him in his hotel room."

## Technical excellence

Of course, a smiling face and a welcoming handshake are not enough to maintain a position among the four largest firms in the country and Simpson Grierson is also proud of the legal prowess at its disposal.

"I guess really the foundation that underlies all aspects of what we do is a commitment to technical excellence," says Stubbs. "When I think of the number of High Court, Court of Appeal and Supreme Court judges that are former partners of mine, it's incredible. I don't think there's another firm in the country that has a greater proportion of judges who are former partners than we do.

"Added to that, our lawyers are all dedicated to ensuring they are aware of what is going on in their clients' businesses. At the end of the day and to be perfectly frank – and this is a terrible thing to have to admit – clients aren't really that interested in the law. They want to know whether you can help them grow their business or solve their problems. It just so happens that if, as a lawyer, you have a bit of knowledge in the specific area of business they are interested in, you may be able to help them – so commercial awareness is an important part of the package."

Unsurprising for a firm at the cutting edge of advances in business practice, Simpson Grierson has an extensive and well-regimented training programme at all levels of development to ensure its lawyers are up to date not only with the latest legal advances, but also with customer care.

"We drum these things into our law graduates and our lateral hires," says Towers. "They have to go through the regime of our client service fundamental training, for which we have a set programme. We put our very junior people through a client interviewing role-playing exercise, which we film, analyze and use in their training when necessary. This is all done by a combination of senior lawyers and professional coaches, and we have full-time training staff here as well, who put them through negotiation skills training, how to get the information you need from clients and even how to deal with difficult clients. We also drum in professional attitudes, things like grooming and business card skills. It's really the full package."

In order to ensure that all of the investment in marketing and training is working and that clients are indeed happy with the service they are receiving, there are structures in place to monitor feedback on a regular basis.

"We do regular qualitative and quantitative research," says Stubbs. "Firstly, to find out what it is that clients want from their lawyers, and then secondly, to determine the extent to which we are meeting those expectations and requirements. This is run by an independent research

Left:  
Greg Towers



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company to make sure that the information we get has integrity, is statistically balanced and is information we can rely on. It gives us an opportunity to identify areas for improvement, because no organization is perfect, and we can feed this information back into the organization so we can make the changes necessary in order to better meet the client's needs."

Perhaps one of the strongest indicators that Simpson Grierson is doing something very right is the fact that, like McNamara, many of its staff have been at the firm for

much of their careers and the company's caring ethos extends as much to its personnel as it does to its clients.

"One of the most rewarding aspects of my job is the people I work with," Towers enthuses. "I've stayed at this firm for a long time and there are very few partners here who have not spent the vast majority of their careers here. I think it's the culture of the firm and the people that we work with. The fact is that we do get on. We are a parity partnership and we operate as one, so you don't have the dog-eat-dog or 'eat what you kill' culture, and that makes a difference. But it also goes right down through all levels of staff. Last week we had 40 of my staff at my holiday home for a barbecue and we were out by the beach and everyone had a swim. It was a lovely day. That's just the culture of our firm."

**Simpson Grierson**

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