

A league of nations

Belgium

Van Bael & Bellis

Van Bael & Bellis stands apart for its personal approach to client management and for the mix of nationalities represented among the team, which mirrors that of the EU institutions with which it deals in so much of its work

Many firms require top-level independent consulting firms to carry out in-depth, statistically weighted surveys of a representative cross-section of their client base before they can be certain they are providing the expected levels of service to their customers. But at Van Bael & Bellis, there is no need to go to such lengths.

Pascal Faes, a partner at the firm who specializes in corporate M&A and joint ventures, explains that the firm's approach to client care is much more innate and organic. "There is a partner who is dedicated to a particular client and who is given the liberty by the firm to manage that client the way they see fit. It is all about knowing your client well and understanding how they like to work: for example, whether they prefer to receive lengthy memos complete with footnotes quoting all the relevant sources, or whether they prefer to receive quick email advice in bullet-point form. Then there are some clients that like to be involved in every step of negotiations or of litigation, while others only want to be informed of major developments. The responsibility rests with the client partner to understand what the client wants."

It's true that the size of the firm makes it easier for it to operate in this way, but this is not to say that Van Bael & Bellis is a bijou practice. Founded 21 years ago by Ivo Van Bael and Jean-François Bellis, it began life with around half a dozen lawyers and now has 10 times that number. Back

in 1985 the small team focused exclusively on EU competition and EU trade law, and while these are still two main pillars of the business, together with other aspects of EU regulatory law, it has since added a third in its Belgian commercial law practice. Since its inception, and perhaps due to its initial specialisms, the firm's client base has always been very international and this is reflected in the composition of its team.

Multinational approach

"Ivo Van Bael and I had worked as partners in charge of the European law department of the De Bandt firm, which is now Linklaters," says Jean-François Bellis. "We wanted to set up a firm on our own, because the way we worked was somewhat different from the other firms. We had a very international outlook, which was shown in the composition of the team with which we started – half of them were non-Belgian. In the firm today we have 60 lawyers and 20 different nationalities, and there are more non-Belgians than Belgians in the firm, which I think is quite unique."

"It is also something that is a great advantage to clients. Since we deal so much with the European Union, we have in the firm the same multinational composition that you find in EU institutions. We do pan-European projects in certain fields and you have to consider EU law and how it is implemented at national level, and it's very handy to have all of those different nationalities under the same roof."

This theme is picked up by Andrzej Kmiecik, a partner from the United Kingdom who specializes in competition law: "I'm one of eight non-Belgian partners at the firm and our multinational nature is very much appreciated by clients," he says. "We have a good international representation at partner level, but it becomes even broader when you get down to associate level. This means we have the ability to deal in any language in the main European countries and those from other parts of the world such as Japan, China and India. And the truly unique thing is having it all in one office."

"We compete with firms that are massively bigger than ourselves and have huge numbers of nationalities, but they are spread all over the world and for special projects there

Belgium

Right:
Jean-François Bellis



has to be coordination between all of their different offices, and I'm not sure that's so different from coordination between different firms. But we have all these people here in one place and can offer that benefit to our clients in a very seamless way, and we hear frequently from our clients that they appreciate the resources available in one place. It is also under the control of the one partner with whom they work and they find that a better service than dealing with lots of different offices in different parts of the world."

Lawyers without boundaries

One of the other ways in which the firm is slightly different from other law firms is that its lawyers are not divided into practice groups or departments. This enables them to take a broader interest in the law and widens their vision when searching for answers to particularly tricky legal problems.

"We have no departmental boundaries at all," explains Jean-François Bellis. "We have some lawyers who will only do competition work, others that will only do trade work and others still that only do Belgian business law – but equally, we have some that will practise in two or all three of those disciplines. Sometimes it is very important to inject the different specialities into one another. This means that at times, we are the only firm to see connections between two different fields, because we have people who work in more than one area."

"There was one competition case recently where we were able to develop an argument based on the trade policy measures which had been taken by the European Union in that field. This approach worked and the European Commission imposed much reduced fines on all of the parties involved, so our argument benefited everybody, not just our client. That is an example of this cross-fertilization in action: using a trade law argument in a competition case – if you are not familiar with both fields, the idea will just not occur to you."

While the international diversity of the firm and its broad outlook towards specific problems are undoubtedly advantages for clients, the firm is also celebrated for its more traditional endeavours in client care.

"Every law firm likes to pride itself on any number of things," says partner Catherine Longeval, a litigation specialist. "Every law firm likes to say that it offers high-quality advice in a timely fashion; every firm likes to say that it offers practical advice; that it takes into account the needs of the client and so on. But I think that maybe the reason we have been recognized is because our firm combines all of those criteria and tries to push them to the highest level possible.

"I don't think client service is a hollow term in this firm. We are really devoted to trying to keep our clients happy by offering practical advice that has been thoroughly researched and given to them within the deadlines imposed. Hopefully, as often as possible, we offer advice that has not been anticipated by the client, by thinking outside the box."

Perfect timing

In many respects the success of Van Bael & Bellis is due as much to an assiduous reading of political and commercial trends as to the founders' unique vision in terms of its internal structure. Since the inception of the firm, there has been a huge increase in the size of the European single market and an explosion in international trade, and it goes without saying that both developments have been accompanied by a profusion of work for the legal profession.

"The firm realized that the market for European law is huge and it has developed along with the European Union, making use of the opportunities," says Reshad Forbes, an EU environmental law and consumer affairs specialist who was made partner in 2005. "This is an area that is still really growing and is very exciting indeed. I've been with the firm since 1997 and have grown with the firm and with the way that the various EU institutions are developing. We



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are all very up to speed with the way the European Union works, whereas I've noticed that some people from other firms are just not that familiar with the institutions and, for example, how the Parliament works or how all the different parts are related to each other."

Although the firm is Brussels based and has no overarching ambitions for international expansion, its trade activities are not limited to Belgian and EU matters, and in order to provide a number of its key clients with a higher standard of service it has opened a satellite office in Geneva.

"We have a number of clients who do a lot of work at the World Trade Organization (WTO)," says Philippe de Baere, a partner and EU and WTO trade law specialist. "They are often based outside Geneva and come for meetings, and it's good they know that they have a place with meeting rooms at their disposal. We also provide on-the-spot assistance for them and we have specialized lawyers on hand if they have questions. It is something that the clients appreciate. In 1995, when the WTO started, we saw that there was a big increase in the subjects covered by the agreement and also there was a more active dispute settlement mechanism, and we thought it would be helpful for our clients to have an office there."

Just as the firm has an informal attitude to the way it maintains its client relationships, it also takes a more relaxed approach towards marketing, preferring to win its reputation purely for its legal prowess than to be noticed for tub-thumping advertising campaigns. One of the key areas in which it puts its name forward is in the area of legal publishing.

Doing it by the book

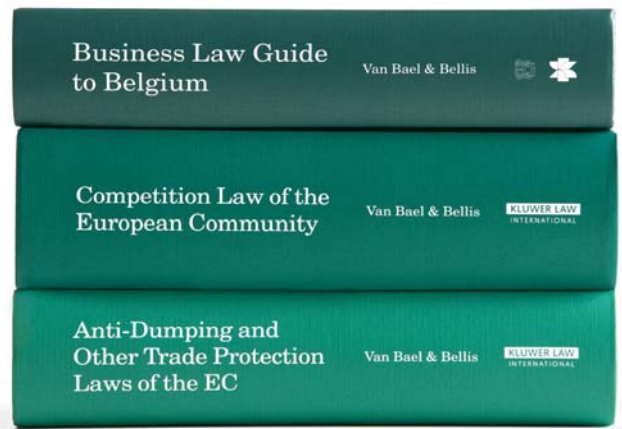
"Anybody can publish a book," says Longeval. "But what you want to do is publish a book that will become a standard text, the kind of book that every respected law firm wants to have in its library, a book that is equally easy to use for in-house counsel and specialists alike. I'd like to think that our competition law book, our anti-dumping book and our Belgian business law guide are all reference books of that sort and we will continue to publish new editions of these books."

You can give the best legal advice in the world, but if the client doesn't have that relationship of trust it doesn't work

“There is also one in the pipeline on Belgian competition law, which is due out soon in English – and that's very rare in Belgium. We recently published an abridged version of the competition book in Japanese and we have produced a training DVD – “Complying with EU competition law” – in 10 languages, in cooperation with one of the firm's clients, which has proved very popular. We do try and keep up the publishing side of things: it's a very nice visiting card for your firm and it also shows that you know those areas of law extremely well. So it's a good tool for our own lawyers, and the fact that a lot of our younger lawyers work alongside their older colleagues on the books obliges them to really get to know about all of the latest developments.”

In addition to the insight into black-letter law that the younger associates gain from working on the publications, each new lawyer who joins the firm is allocated a partner as a sort of personal tutor who oversees his or her development at the firm – which, given that there are no practice groups, helps the new recruits find a grounding at the firm. They are also introduced to all areas of a lawyer's work right from the start of their training.

“All of our attorneys, no matter how junior, will be involved on each job from beginning to end and not just asked to write a memo on a single topic,” says Faes. “They



will also be introduced to clients as soon as possible, in order to learn how to react and how to behave with them. I think these things are important from both a human perspective and a job satisfaction perspective, as they immediately feel they have some responsibility.”

This early introduction to clients also helps them become accustomed to building relationships, an important factor for a firm that prides itself on the long-term associations it forms with clients. The crucial aspect of this point is the development of a sense of trust between firm and client, believes De Baere.

“Ivo Van Bael always says that for many people, going to a law firm is like going to the garage with your car,” says De Baere. “The mechanic looks at your engine and then he looks at you with a serious face and says you were lucky you came to him when you did because if you'd driven another 50 kilometres you'd have burst into flames. At that point, you think he's either trying it on or saving your life. Clients rely on the same sort of instincts with their lawyer. If they feel at ease, they trust him – on the other hand, you can give the best legal advice in the world, but if the client doesn't have that relationship of trust it doesn't work.”

Van Bael & Bellis

Avenue Louise 165 Louizalaan
B-1050 Brussels
Belgium
Tel: +32 2 647 73 50
Fax: +32 2 640 64 99

www.vanbaelbellis.com

Contact:

Jean-François Bellis
Managing partner
jfbellis@vanbaelbellis.com

Other offices:

Geneva