

Service you can trust

Poland

Salans

Excelling in both established and emerging markets, Salans has maintained a painstaking approach to client care that has brought lasting success and international recognition

International firm Salans is no stranger to success. Over the years it has scooped a string of glittering prizes across its geographical sphere of operations, whether as dealmaker, rainmaker or emerging market powerhouse. But when it comes to client care, it is Salans' Poland office which leads the field: it has now been fêted for its sterling service for the second consecutive year.

While the litany of awards in Salans' back catalogue bears testament to its achievements, there is always a danger that familiarity can breed, if not contempt, then at least complacency. You might think that an endless stream of awards could create a certain nonchalance towards such accolades, as if they have simply become expected as a matter of course. But a deeper look at the *modus operandi* of Salans reveals it to be a constantly evolving firm that prides itself on creating lasting relationships with its clients and offering a service that eschews the usual legalese.

Noted for its expertise in developing markets, Salans possesses a client list ranging from multinational corporations to sovereign states and not-for-profit organizations. Working across such a broad spectrum comes easily, according to Tomasz Dabrowski, managing partner of the Warsaw office and a leading authority in Poland in areas as diverse as asset finance, real estate and venture capital.

For Dabrowski, the key is the human touch. "We try to avoid the boring legal approach and lengthy memos. We

often tell new recruits to forget everything they've learned during their studies and encourage them to be practical rather than academic."

Of course, this is not to imply that Salans lawyers are anything less than expert on the finer points of the law; but the defining feature of the firm's service is the presentation of this expertise in an accessible format. Allied to this is a commitment to cater for every last one of the client's needs.

One-stop shop

"Our philosophy is to be a full-service shop for our clients," explains Dabrowski. "We have extensive knowledge on matters of legal practice and in core sectors of the economy, and we have partners in every area that bring specialist knowledge. This is the first aspect of creating an excellent service. Secondly, we try to develop long-term relationships with our clients. Our aim is to achieve a sustainable flow of business and to create an environment in which we can build and grow together."

The reward for this long-view approach to business partnerships is the level of trust invested in the firm, which is compounded by the fact that Salans is most emphatically not the type of firm that is content just to take the money and run. So when a business approaches Salans for advice, it can expect a response that is comprehensive, concise and commercially oriented. "It may seem to cost us income in terms of the low fees we offer, but we want to give practical advice that is cost efficient for our clients," continues Dabrowski.

Certainly, reasonable fees have been no impediment to Salans' growth, as demonstrated by its rapid expansion since its founding in Paris in 1978. Over the years the firm has grown steadily and continues to do so. In the Warsaw office alone, the number of employees has soared from around 50 to 80-plus in the last two years, and the milestone of 100 will almost certainly be reached in the not-too-distant future. And partner Arek Krasnodebski, a leading expert in energy and natural resources and project finance, points out that the firm has received acclaim for this impressive growth rate: "In the fourth annual survey from a leading Polish law gazette we were recognized as

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one of the three most developing and expanding law firms in the country, and the only one of international status.” This global scope is reflected by the fact that Salans has offices in hubs such as New York, London, Paris and Shanghai. In fact, in every major business and trading centre, you will find a Salans outpost.

This progressive expansion is in no small part due to the



wealth of opportunities for professional development on offer at Salans, which in Krasnodebski's view are largely down to the wide range of businesses and nationalities with which the firm transacts. And with job satisfaction running high thanks to the opportunities for progression and the stimulating, varied nature of the work, it is unsurprising that Salans lawyers are enthusiastic devotees to the cause of client care. It is this pleasing symbiosis, Krasnodebski suggests, which continues to drive the firm forward today; it seems that Salans even thanks its own clients for their contribution in helping to hone the excellent service they receive.

A bespoke service

Krasnodebski goes on to describe how the firm's approach is tailored specifically for each new prospective partnership. “The process of client care is focused on the client's business and needs. We try to listen very carefully to what our clients tell us and what the market says.”

For Krasnodebski, there is no precise methodology because each client is different. His only rule is to employ a rigorous approach and he expects his team to do likewise. Salans has no formal training programme in client care as such. Instead, and far more enduring, a client care ethic is ingrained within the fibre of the firm itself. There exists a belief that teambuilding is the key to offering a premier



Left:
Arek Krasnodebski

service and that, within this framework, new employees will be integrated into the Salans way.

Part of what new recruits learn is that enthusiasm and drive are absolutely vital in the provision of client care. With the work patterns of modern professionals demanding serious hours at the office, the aim is to foster a strong bond. “We have to spend a lot of time together. In fact, we are almost living together,” notes Krasnodebski. “It is important we learn how to work together very quickly.”

This close exposure to seasoned lawyers also serves to educate the new recruits. As Krasnodebski observes, “It is better to see how a professional operates rather than have a coach tell them how to do it in a two-day course.”

Thanks to the depth and breadth of knowledge at the firm’s disposal, it is very easy to respond to the specific concerns of clients. “It is simply a question of recognizing and illustrating what types of activities can be expected from us,” says Krasnodebski. “We are a full-scope law firm, representing and providing assistance in almost all areas. This is an extensive list that includes, for example, real estate, banking, litigation, IT, pharmaceuticals and telecommunications.” Combined with the firm’s commitment to lasting partnership with its clients, this diverse expertise makes for an unbeatable proposition. Increasingly, says Dabrowski, the firm is now focusing more

on different sectors rather than on new areas of law. “For example, we have a special appreciation and knowledge of the real estate sector. We believe our expertise is the strongest in Central Europe.”

Krasnodebski graduated from university in Krakow before moving to Stockholm to train for his LLM. “At the time this was extraordinary, but now it is far more common. For example, two young associates here at Salans have recently gone to spend some time at the prestigious Columbia and Stanford Universities in the United States. They will take the Bar exam there before returning.” Today there is almost an expectation that employees will arrive at the firm with international experience, and with an ever-growing number of young people signing up to student exchange programmes such as Erasmus, it is increasingly likely that prospective candidates will have a degree of international experience and knowledge before they embark on their career with the firm. International sensibilities are already finely tuned at Salans, which boasts an impressive number of polyglots among its partners.

Investment in people and people skills is at the heart of the Salans philosophy. In fact, for Dabrowski, this is the single most important issue at the firm. “Each managing partner will impose a certain way of doing things on his or her team. I can’t manage everything in my own firm and so we focus on recruiting appropriate people who can deliver and do an excellent job. My main role is to inspire partners in all our jurisdictions to educate the members of their team in the correct way of executing their role.”

Softly spoken success

Up until very recently, many marketing practices were banned under Polish law and so recognition has been achieved the traditional way, through personal commendation. It is not that the firm has quietly gone about its business – as a colossus of the European legal scene, inconspicuousness is simply an impossibility – but there has been no shouting from the rooftops. “Because of these restrictions, we have just focused on providing an excellent service to our clients,” explains Krasnodebski. “Also, I think they feel safer this way rather than with us



Left:
Tomasz Dabrowski

organizing some aggressive marketing campaign.” In fact, he admits, “we’ve been so busy that there hasn’t been time for a concerted marketing push even if ethical codes did not prevent a lot of this type of activity in Poland.”

Instead, for Salans, good news travels far and wide. Krasnodebski gives an example of this grapevine phenomenon that demonstrates the high regard in which the firm is held. “I heard a story in which it was said every lawyer says something different. But our client apparently totally refuted this, saying, ‘This is not the case at Salans.’” Quite rightly, the team takes pride in this consistency and honesty of service.

But with no direct measure of client satisfaction, how can they be certain that they enjoy the full confidence of their clients, which they have taken such pains to win? “You can just feel it,” says Krasnodebski. “You can feel that you are building and maintaining relationships and that they stay with you because they trust you.” It is this aspect of his work that he finds most rewarding. “Building something from the ground when nothing was there before is an experience that stays with you forever.”

Dabrowski takes a different view. “Our proficiency in client care is easily measured,” he insists. “If they come back, you know you are doing something right.” And there is no doubt that clients do keep returning. Meanwhile, appreciation and recognition – not least through the ILO Client Choice Awards – give Dabrowski immense satisfaction and inspire him to continue seeking new ways to improve the service the firm provides. To this end, investment in technology has become vital, with particular attention paid to communications. Online negotiations and video conferences now allow Salans to offer greater speed of delivery. Clients can also monitor what legal documents are being prepared for them simply by visiting a dedicated website. In essence, Salans’ *raison d’être* is to provide as much advice as is practicable in the quickest possible time.

This is a firm that offers a truly globally integrated service. Its international focus, coupled with a deep local knowledge, gives it the perfect tools to stay true to the philosophy espoused by Carl Salans himself: that of supporting clients, both global and local, with the resources

and expertise of a large international law firm but the personal attention of a local office. At the time of writing, Salans had just moved into bigger premises and was planning “a little party” to mark the occasion. That several clients were invited to celebrate alongside the Salans team is just further evidence that the firm’s relationships extend far beyond the usual professional niceties – they are rather partnerships of equals which are forged to last.

Just by putting the right people in place and cultivating a deep-rooted team ethic, Salans has assured its success. Associates and partners alike are encouraged to think for themselves and, more importantly, to think about what the client needs. A constant drive to marry its two core principles is what sets the firm apart from its rivals. And this formula is simple: be good at what you do and treat the client as you would a friend.

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