

Russian evolution

Russia

CMS Cameron McKenna LLP

As one of the early entrants into Eastern Europe, CMS Cameron McKenna has brought the client care standards of a global firm to an increasingly international market

The fall of the Soviet Union left Russia in turmoil. Poor economic planning resulted in spiralling poverty, debt and ultimately a constitutional crisis and suspended legislature. Since the very end of the last century, however, economic stability followed by eight years of sustained growth has given the country a chance to start rebuilding its tattered legal system. This ongoing process has seen an attempt to blend indigenous Russian legal values, from both before and during the communist era, with more Western concepts of justice and due process.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that a number of the major international law firms have seen an opportunity in Russia. One of the most prominent of these is CMS Cameron McKenna, which has brought the experience and commitment to client care that it demonstrates around the world and applied them, in equal measure, in Russia and other Eastern European markets with great effect.

“There is a dynamic, enthusiastic and committed engagement in what we are doing in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia,” says David Cranfield, head of CMS Cameron McKenna’s Moscow office. “We’ve been in Moscow for over 16 years, so we’ve had a long commitment to this part of the world. We’ve got really substantial offices, which continue to grow organically, and there’s a real dynamism among the lawyers we’ve got working in this region. I think that’s something that attracts me and makes me want to be a part of this firm so much. I suspect it is

also something that attracts our clients and I think they enjoy working with us because they meet in us people who are enthusiastic about what they are doing.”

Cranfield is quick to point out that client relationships are dealt with on a firm-wide basis and part of the reason such excellent client service can be offered to the firm’s Russian clients is due to the carefully planned infrastructure that underlies CMS Cameron McKenna’s whole operation.

“I think that the client care culture we have in Moscow is the same as we have throughout the firm,” he explains. “We reflect the kind of service that our clients would expect to receive, regardless of which office they are using.”

Finding the right partner

Central to this client care policy for CMS Cameron McKenna is the client relationship partner who is selected in discussion with the client and whose role is to ensure that the firm understands exactly what the client’s needs are on the one side, and that the firm is acting upon those needs on the other.

In order to ensure that this vital position of relationship partner works as efficiently as possible, independent researchers were brought in to evaluate the different aspects of what a client might demand from such a role – from professional expectations through to the personal attributes of potential candidates.

“We would always have a client partner,” explains Cranfield. “They will be principally responsible for governing the relationship. But having said that, I think one of the strengths of the firm is that we tend to act for our clients across a number of offices, particularly because of the quality and longevity of our Central and Eastern European practice. So we tend to find that clients work with more than one office; so a client will have a number of relationships within the firm. But from a formal, structural point of view, we like to manage the relationship as a whole through one principal person; otherwise it can unravel slightly.”

Helping the relationship partner draw in all the different strands of each client’s dealings with the firm is a highly skilled, centrally located marketing department, which operates behind the scenes and performs an

Russia

Right:
David Cranfield

Far right:
Kirill Ratnikov



invaluable role. This again highlights the advantages of having the might of a large international law firm behind regional offices.

“The whole thing is underpinned by quite a lot of investment,” says Cranfield. “I don’t think marketing is really the right word for it; it’s more a client relationship development department. The core of the team is based in London, but it has representatives in all of the different regions – there are two dedicated people in the Moscow office, for example.

“As they’re spread throughout the firm, they keep an eye on all of our relationships and they will compile any presentations or transactions pertaining to a particular client, including the people we’ve dealt with and any feedback, and then all of that information is stored centrally and can be accessed very easily to make use of when we deal further with that client, in whichever office it may be.”

Monitoring feedback

The marketing department also coordinates another of the firm’s key strategies for ensuring that its customer service remains at the highest level: that is, the client feedback surveys it performs.

“We’re focused on helping clients with their businesses and our client surveys really help us with that,” says Steven Shone, head of the firm’s Central and Eastern Europe real estate practice. “We have a system of conducting interviews with clients – usually via third parties on our behalf – in order to get detailed feedback on the job we have done, and we use those client service reports to try and tailor the service in the way that they want it.”

These client surveys are normally conducted face to face by an independent interviewer, so as not to put any pressure on clients regarding their responses and to elicit honest opinions on the firm’s performance and the overall relationship.

In addition to the general interview, the clients are asked to score the firm in five areas: understanding of the client’s needs, quality of advice, ability to manage work, value for money and overall satisfaction. If sufficiently high

standards are not reached, plans are actioned immediately to try and improve performance in the relevant areas and the situation is then closely monitored.

Such has been the value of this strategy that the firm has published a report entitled “Why Don’t Law Firms Listen?” which lays out the results of the client feedback programme and suggests that the legal profession as a whole needs to address what it describes as “the persistent shortfall between a client’s expectations and the actual service level they receive from their legal advisers”.

Not only does the firm aim to boost its performance by seeking feedback from its clients, but it also looks to improve its relationship with its staff through similar means. Every three months or so, the firm’s lawyers and support staff are asked to comment on their supervisors. This approach is invaluable in such a large organization and ensures that all levels of the firm continue to perform at the top of their game.

One of the key areas in which the insight obtained in the surveys is put to good use is in the firm’s training schemes.

“We are very serious about the professional development of our lawyers,” explains Kirill Ratnikov, a partner in the Moscow office. “We concentrate on proper training methods, create special training programmes for younger lawyers and new members of the team. There are also regular meetings for each of the practice groups on both regional and local levels. These meetings provide a very good opportunity to exchange experience and know-how and develop more specialized skills.”

This method of learning from one’s colleagues is encouraged at the firm and is exercised on a daily basis in Ratnikov’s team.

“If I’m working with a new young lawyer in my team, I often place them in my office so they can learn directly on the job” he says. “It results in a quick improvement of their skills and knowledge. We also give them creative assignments to reinforce the importance of what they are doing, just as we share with them our more mundane tasks. Finally, I involve more team members in the big projects and transactions, and they often have to be in direct contact with clients.”



The right stuff

This sort of mentoring helps the younger lawyers to acquire the requisite skills for dealing with, developing and retaining clients. Indeed, as Cranfield points out, the ability of a lawyer to create this kind of relationship with the client is one of the key qualities that the firm looks for when it is recruiting and promoting young talent.

“While we do have a training programme internally,” he says, “we try in our recruitment policy to find lawyers who are personalities and would naturally be forming and developing the right sort of relationships. So while we do provide specific training, part of the process of promoting people is that they should be able to demonstrate how to develop these relationships that are important to clients.”

One of the key ways in which the firm asks its lawyers to address their client relationships is to “put themselves in the clients’ shoes” and then advise accordingly. This demands an in-depth understanding of each client’s business and efforts are made to get closer to the client through joint training initiatives, social events and regular client visits.

Properly understanding a client’s business can also lead to discovering ways in which value can be added to the relationship, suggests Shone.

“Due to the rapid development of the Russian economy, there are quite a lot of new, inexperienced people in all professions,” he explains. “One of the things we did for one of our clients was to help them develop a training programme in-house to teach their own people and their external advisers about the legal issues in their project. In this case it was a real estate company, and I suggested that we get the whole marketing team into our offices for a half-day seminar and go through the lease with them. We explained the key issues to be negotiated, discussed where the pressure points were and underlined anything that they shouldn’t get involved in without taking our advice. I gave them my mobile number and told them they could call me whenever those points came up. During the programme, I got about five or six calls in the course of negotiations saying ‘Can I do this?’ and I said, ‘Well, no you can’t but...’ and in each case we found a way to do it. So that half-day

There’s a real dynamism among the lawyers we’ve got working in this region. I think that’s something that attracts me and makes me want to be a part of this firm so much. I suspect it is also something that attracts our clients

We've been in Moscow for over 16 years, so we've had a long commitment to this part of the world

Left:
Steven Shone



freebie effectively made their business more profitable. Often it's not only doing what you're asked to do, but seeing if there's something else that you can contribute."

The changing landscape

The development of the new Russian legal system of which Shone speaks is one of the greatest challenges facing law firms operating in the country. Because there are fewer protocols in place for dealing with corporate law, much of what the firm does in Moscow is in fact governed by overseas laws through holding companies. This is another area in which CMS Cameron McKenna stands apart from the crowd in Russia, according to Cranfield.

"One thing that has served us well in Russia is our commitment to having people on the ground," he says. "You'll find that a lot of the transactions that are done in Russia are subject to English law, so quite a number of firms will do a substantial amount of their international work in London and negotiate documents from there. We've always had, as part of what we are and what we do, people actually on the ground – people who live here, people who make their careers within the region. So if you're getting a document negotiated by someone who's on the ground, who's able to attend all the meetings and who is familiar with the locality, who works day in, day out with Russian lawyers – and by that process becomes pretty familiar with Russian law, and brings that experience to bear in what they're doing – that has to be a better-quality service."

It's also the chance to be in a region where the law is being created almost underfoot that makes the Russian market such an exciting place for lawyers, according to Shone – particularly for those at a firm like CMS Cameron McKenna, which has been there since the beginning. For with that experience comes a feeling of achievement which in turn inspires the enthusiasm and commitment so admired by clients.

"What's really good is that now, after doing the sort of work we've been doing, we're getting to the stage where you can do a deal by referencing previous such transactions – where client, every lawyer and every surveyor on a deal has done the same thing before. That makes it all happen much faster. Previously, it would be one of us, in a room, talking to everyone else – it wasn't so much a negotiation as a seminar."

CMS Cameron McKenna LLP

Kesco House
Korobeynikov per 1, bldg 1A
119034 Moscow
Russia
Tel: +7 495 258 5000
Fax: +7 495 258 5100

www.law-now.com

Contact:

David Cranfield
Head of Moscow office
david.cranfield@cms-cmck.com

Other offices:

Aberdeen, Beijing, Bratislava, Bristol, Bucharest, Budapest, Edinburgh, Kyiv, London, Prague, Sofia, Warsaw