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LAW FIRM BUSINESS

Going Solo — Again

The same freewheeling spirit that's kept IP Lawyer Richard E. Neff popular with tech business has allowed for flexibility in his practice

By Susan McRae

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MANHATTAN BEACH — Two decades after launching his first technology and intellectual property law boutique, Richard E. Neff is back where he started with his second-generation Neff Law Firm.

Housed on the Manhattan Beach Studios lot — home to TV shows “Psych” and “CSI: Miami” — Neff’s office is in a fitting location for a practice that focuses on the media and entertainment industries. It also suits his lifestyle.

“I have creative people around,” said Neff, casually dressed and sporting a trendy stubble. “I live in Manhattan Beach. My life is such that I can go to the gym in the afternoon and work till 10 at night because I don’t have any children at home now.

“Initially, I may just expand [my practice] here.”

Neff started his new firm a year ago. He just hired a trademark of counsel and is in the market for part-time litigation support. He employs a file clerk once a month and a billing clerk and other help on an as-needed basis.

Neff credits his optimism for repeat success to 22 years of solid experience in the field — including 12 years of running his own firm once before — and a facility with languages. He’s fluent in Spanish and Portuguese and has a working knowledge of French.

A Philadelphia native, Neff and his two brothers learned Spanish as children, aided by their parents, who took the family on vacations to Spanish-speaking countries. He also spent a year in Peru as a Fulbright scholar.

After graduating from Yale Law School in 1980, Neff began his career as a corporate lawyer at Covington & Burling in Wash-



ington, D.C. Four years later, he moved to Arnold & Porter. He added Portuguese to his language repertoire when the firm sent him to Georgetown University’s language school to help it represent the governments of Brazil and Venezuela during the countries’ debt restructuring negotiations.

While Neff enjoyed the international aspect, corporate practice didn’t excite him.

In the late 1980s, he answered an ad for an anti-piracy czar at what now is called Business Software Alliance, an organization then being formed by the general counsels of top-rung software companies, including Microsoft Corp., Lotus, WordPerfect Corp. and Ashton Tate Corp.

Though he didn’t get the job — the association chose someone with litigation experience — he made valuable contacts. More important, he found his niche in the technology sector.

In 1989, one of those new contacts, Ashton Tate, hired him as deputy general

counsel for international business in its Los Angeles office. Neff also became a board member of the Business Software Alliance, and in 1991 was elected chairman.

“Once I got to California and got thrown into this tech stuff when it was new and had the international experience, I thought, ‘This stuff is fun,’” Neff said.

One of his strengths, he said, is translating clearly and understandably into contracts what software engineers wish to convey, particularly when it involves foreign languages.

In 1992, software giant Borland bought Ashton Tate and relocated the company to Santa Cruz. Neff didn’t want to move his family again, and he negotiated a buyout package that he estimated would give him a year and a half to get his own firm up and running.

He didn’t have to wait long. Three days after he founded his first technology and intellectual property boutique, called Neff

Law Group, Microsoft flew him to its Redmond, Wash. headquarters and asked if it could have all of his time. He'd become good friends with company officials while starting international anti-piracy programs for Business Software Alliance while he was its board chairman.

"I told Microsoft they couldn't have all my time — I was doing nothing — but I said you can have all the time you need," Neff said.

Microsoft became a major client. Neff spent half of 1993 in Mexico for the company, accompanying police and prosecutors on black-market raids to protect the company's software under Latin America's new copyright laws — laws Neff had helped rewrite as chairman of Business Software Alliance.

Intuit Inc. was another big client during those years. The Web-based software giant had a 40-member, in-house legal department, but carved out a special section for Neff Law Group to handle all of its international transactions.

During the next 12 years, Neff grew the firm to 13, including seven lawyers.

But by 2004, a perfect storm was brewing on Neff's personal and business fronts. He was going through a divorce, and after a decade of using his firm in their technology, Internet, e-commerce and media sectors, Microsoft and Intuit — his two biggest clients — were giving signals of moving the work in-house.

Neff didn't want to start cutting staff,

and his personal life didn't leave him much time to scout for new clients. So he accepted an offer to move his lawyers and clients to Greenberg Glusker Fields Claman & Machtinger, where he became chairman of the firm's Intellectual Property and Technology Practice Group.

Five years later, as the economy tumbled, Greenberg Glusker started shedding lawyers, from 105 when Neff started to 69 today. Although Neff's department wasn't in danger, he said the firm "became a different place."

"After a while, I wanted to do my own thing again," Neff said.

In January 2010, he launched Neff Law Firm.

So far, he's amassed 15 regular clients, including ones he brought to Greenberg Glusker from the old Neff Law Group, as well as newer clients he acquired at Greenberg Glusker — such as APM Music, the world's biggest music supplier for films and television.

"He's the fastest, most efficient lawyer I've ever worked with," said APM President Adam Taylor, who came to Neff six years ago at Greenberg Glusker to handle licensing deals, structured investments and

Neff Law Firm

Manhattan Beach

Number of lawyers: 2

Founded: January 2010

Specialty: Intellectual property, technology

Tips:

- Find your core strengths and capitalize on them
- Keep current in your area of expertise, especially if it's technology and new media
- Write a blog to get your name out to potential clients
- Publish articles
- Speak at bar and other organizations' events in your practice area

negotiations. "There was no way I would not go with him when he [started his new firm]."

Other clients include Swiss-owned peripheral-device maker Logitech, whose vice president and general counsel, Catherine Valentine, served as Intuit's general counsel when Neff handled that account. When Valentine moved to Logitech, she brought Neff onboard. He's developing an international warranty for the company's products for use around the world.

Neff also represents Informatica Corp., a world-

wide data integration software supplier in Redwood City, on copyright counseling and negotiating and writing licensing deals domestically and in Latin America. He also managed overseas anti-piracy copyright enforcement for three of the world's major trade associations: Business Software Alliance, Association of American Publishers and Interactive Digital Software Association (now ESA), and works for several French clients, including the major video website Dailymotion.

"I'm probably happiest being my own boss," Neff said of his new venture. "I think I'm wired that way."