

How Small Firms Can Steal Away Star Prospects from Large Firms

Attorneys are attracted by firms where they can feel important and inspired. It should go without saying that not every firm can engender this sense of importance to the degree many smaller firms can. Accordingly, this is one reason smaller firms often attract star talent over their larger-firm counterparts.

In watching certain smaller firms grow, we are amazed by how good some of them have become in recruiting high-level attorneys with some of the most outstanding qualifications imaginable. Firms that are the best at recruiting are able to interest attorneys in their firms and get attorneys to work there by tapping into the needs that attorneys have for both prestige and a sense of importance. How masterfully this is done will have a lot to do with the firms' success in getting young attorneys to come to work for them.

John Grisham's *The Firm*. The actions of these smaller firms, in many respects, paralleled what was going on in the illustrative recruiting that took place in John Grisham's book *The Firm*. Because this example is it is important to give an explanation about the book.

Mitch McDeere, the appealing hero in *The Firm*, is a poor kid whose only assets are a first-class mind, a Harvard law degree, and a beautiful, loving wife. More than probably hundreds of firms he could have chosen from in the United States, Mitch chose Bendini, Lambert & Locke ("Bendini Lambert") in Memphis, Tennessee - an area of the United States where he had absolutely zero ties. Bendini Lambert offered Mitch more than any other firm: a new BMW; a new house; and a large salary, with many incentives and bonuses.

They also offered Mitch a community and way of life and the sense that he was joining a very important firm.

In our belief, the reason Mitch chose Bendini Lambert is the same reason countless attorneys are persuaded to join less prestigious and smaller firms over larger and more prestigious firms on a consistent basis. We believe an attorney like Mitch would have chosen Bendini Lambert because of its perceived prestige level and the sense of importance he believed he would get from working in the firm.

In the movie and the book, Mitch knows very little about Bendini Lambert before he even goes on his first interview. In fact, he only comes to take Bendini Lambert seriously when he realizes he will be part of something that is very difficult to get into and that has a lot of other top attorneys in it. The firm does an extremely good job of impressing upon Mitch (1) the potential for success he will have there, (2) that it makes very few offers a year, and (3) that he has the opportunity to be part of something great. Mitch is also made to feel that he will be part of an exclusive and highly qualified group of attorneys.

Bendini Lambert's ability to make Mitch feel he is joining something important is why we believe Mitch chooses the firm. As we review examples of firms that have managed to convince our top candidates to work for them over smaller firms, we are struck again and again by the similarity between what these firms do and what happened with Mitch at Bendini Lambert.

OBSERVATION: It should go without saying that large, prestigious law firms can make associates feel important by joining them. In fact, we believe this is why associates join most large law firms and do so regardless of how they actually feel about the firms. For the most part, larger firms often become complacent and feel they do not need to make associates feel important and can rest on their laurels. This is one reason why smaller firms can become good competitors for the same talent and steal star talent away from larger firms.