

'Speak Out and Speak Up': Akin Gump's Kim Koopersmith on Firm Leaders' Responsibility to Their Communities

In an interview, Koopersmith discusses why the onus is on leadership in difficult times and addresses lingering questions about flexibility surrounding remote work and maintaining client relationships.

By Ben Seal
April 28, 2021

More than anything, Kim Koopersmith is worried about the loss of connection. The Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld chairwoman is preoccupied by thoughts about how her firm can restore what the pandemic has taken away. Coming off of a year in which Akin Gump posted 6.5% revenue growth and a 16.3% leap in profits per partner, she has a sense of optimism about what the rest of 2021 will bring. But even if she can see a light at the end of the tunnel, questions linger about flexibility surrounding remote work, how to maintain client relationships, and how to lead the firm in the right direction. In this conversation, she discusses those issues, as well as the responsibility of a firm leader to “speak out and speak up” on matters beyond the practice and business of law.

Ben Seal: Akin Gump is coming off of a very successful year financially, and all signs point to another good year for the industry with vaccines slowly helping to lift us out of the pandemic. How would you describe the mood around your firm these days?

Kim Koopersmith: I think the mood is hopeful. That is in many respects. With the rollout of the vaccines and the fact that it's now turning to spring, you can feel that sense of things moving in a better direction after one very long and difficult year. I'm feeling that energy emerging, that hopefulness emerging in the firm, which is a welcome state for all of us.

BS: What's your perspective on the firm's near-term future from a business standpoint?

KK: We had a very strong 2020, and I'm very pleased that one-quarter of the way into 2021, the firm is rowing in the same direction and really meeting the needs of our clients with the unique challenges and opportunities that they're

facing. It makes me feel hopeful in terms of our firm direction. I care a lot about how the people at the firm feel, so knowing that they too are feeling that sense of a light at the end of the tunnel contributes to that overall positive direction. When our clients are feeling very connected to us and we're providing really strong service, and the people who make up the firm are also feeling valued and like they're able to contribute, I'm feeling very positive.

We're well into planning for when we will return. We've done a pretty extensive survey of our workforce on the issues that are front and center for everyone. What is the return going to look like? How much flexibility in remote work will people want to continue? We want to understand people's concerns about what the issues will be when we are going back to work, whether that's child care, feeling safe on public transportation, caring for parents and other family members—trying to be thoughtful and responsive to everyone's thoughts going forward is right in the middle of how we're deciding what Akin Gump post-pandemic will look like.

BS: When you think about flexibility, how are you trying to set the parameters?

KK: Like most things in life, I don't feel like there is a black-and-white answer to this. I think it is very much going to be an iterative process. We've long had a good deal of



Kim Koopersmith of Akin Gump

flexibility. We had an agile work policy long ago. We have lots of people working in lots of different places. Flexibility will continue to be a part of what we look like going forward, but we've learned during the course of the year that there is tremendous value from the connections people feel.

We're a firm where culture matters a lot. What makes Akin Gump the firm that it is is important to me. That makes me want to include in our flexibility recognition of the positives that come from being together, and I expect that whatever policies will emerge will include the value of flexibility and the value that comes from connections, being together, developing relationships, mentoring, being mentored—all of those have significant components that are enhanced by being together.

BS: There's a risk for firms of some kind of hangover after such a strong 2020 and given the enormous effort lawyers and staff put forward to address clients' needs. How are you guarding against that risk?

KK: There's no doubt that the last year-plus has taken its toll on everyone, and we need to be honest that while we have all soldiered through, it has been hard. There are a few things I've focused on to try and make sure we're able to move forward. One is the basic principle that communication helps. It allows people to feel part of things, it reduces anxiety about the unknown, it makes people feel comfortable and valued. In the beginning of the pandemic people got used to hearing from me, frequently in the middle of the night, with my thoughts on how we're going to keep moving forward. That clicked as one of the ways in which we keep the firm fabric strong. I think that's one of the most important tools available to keep momentum going.

I also think people have valued the positive feelings they've had about how they've engaged at the firm and the degree to which everyone has cared about each other. Instead of a hangover, there's been a meshing and a strengthening of the bonds people feel to each other and to the firm. You can focus on resilience, you can focus on we're all in this together, but people need to feel like they have a connection to each other and to the firm. That's been our guiding principle and I think it will get us through this next leg of the journey.

BS: What kind of changes have you seen recently regarding what clients are asking for?

KK: Clients, just like law firms, are moving into a higher gear of what the world is going to look like post-pandemic. There's a gearing up that I have seen in the actual planning, but also in their view of opportunities and reasons they want

to move their business in different directions. There's also been a very positive focus on partnering with law firms, having made it through the last year. There's enthusiasm for the firms that have rallied and connected.

I'm seeing an increased interest in partnering with us on diversity and inclusion efforts and pro bono. I'm seeing the things that are part of our culture are also things that our clients care about and as we move into a post-pandemic world, our clients are as interested as we are in how to have it be a positive return and one where people feel valued and want to come back to work.

BS: I wanted to ask about your recent statements about anti-Asian American violence in this country, which I think are a reflection of your broader outspokenness on issues beyond the practice of law. Over the past year we've seen a lot of law firm leaders find their voice in one way or another. What do you see as the role of a law firm leader beyond managing the firm from a business perspective?

KK: This is my ninth year as chair of the firm. I had this reconciliation with myself much earlier on in my time as chair. One of the things I gave a lot of thought to was what is my role beyond the firm. What are the powers and privileges I have in this unique role? My conclusion was I have the privilege and responsibility to speak out on issues where right and wrong is at stake.

I can very clearly remember the night I wrote a message on Charlottesville, and I remember thinking about my responsibility to not accept that there were good people on both sides—that was not a true statement. I have the privilege of being in a position where I can say that, and I did. It wasn't just that the reaction at my firm was positive. I felt that I was doing the responsible thing. And from that moment forward there have been numerous opportunities to make sure we as a firm have clarity on where we stand.

I have the privilege of running a firm where people appreciate and value that I am prepared to lead on issues and speak out, and while not everyone in the firm agrees on everything, everyone agrees there are issues that need to be addressed, and having a chair who is prepared to express candor, compassion and an insistence on challenging notions of racial injustice—I think everyone in the firm appreciates that.

BS: Do you sense a shift in the way your counterparts in the industry are carrying that weight?

KK: More people are coming around to that view. I think more firm chairs are coming to the conclusion that it's important to speak out and speak up and that being a

bystander is losing out on an important responsibility of leadership.

BS: You've also spoken often about mental health in the legal industry. How would you assess firm leaders' handling of their responsibility to care for the well-being of their people?

KK: I certainly think the pandemic created a shift in recognition at almost every law firm of the importance of mental health and overall wellness. We had come to that as a firm quite some time ago, but I think the importance of it really hit home in this last year. It's hard for everyone. Acknowledging that and giving people as many tools as we can to cope with those challenges is really important.

Going back to my role as a leader, I also think it's important as a leader to be honest. My dad died two weeks before we shut down last year, on Feb. 23. It was really hard to run a law firm a week after I attended my father's funeral. There are people who would have kept that private, but I told people, "This is where I am." People were not just supportive of me but were then comfortable to open up to me. I remember someone in London said, "I just lost my grandmother, and hearing you speak openly about loss means so much to me." It sets the tone at the firm when you say "things keep me up at night." It's made me stronger, and it's made people feel like they can work more successfully in a firm where people can acknowledge the difficulties and the challenges we're all facing.

BS: On that topic, we've heard a lot about changes over the past year to how and when attorneys work, and how that all rolls into mental health. What's been your experience at Akin Gump when it comes to attorneys shifting toward a more round-the-clock schedule?

KK: I think everybody is feeling that sense of an absence of boundaries. I'm sure we all have that same feeling that if someone doesn't answer the phone you can't picture where else they would be. But we need to break that cycle. People need to find time. They need a chance to not feel they need to check their phone throughout dinner. They need some time to regroup.

We've tried to focus on all the ways we can empower those that are creating the work opportunities and those that are doing the work to meet in a place that is constructive. Does this assignment have to go out now? Can we be clear about the expectations for timing? We'll always meet clients' needs, but everyone is trying to do it in a constructive way,

recognizing that the elimination of almost any boundaries between working and your personal time have been so blurred.

BS: Have you found any tactics to overcome that challenge?

KK: Our clients are also in the same situation we are. I can't tell you how many clients I've spoken to who said, "I'm speaking to you from a closet or from a car." They're living the same life we are, trying to make this all work, balancing kids and dinner and working really hard. One of the things that I think has worked best is to have good client relationships where you can have those candid conversations. We've also made sure that the team is an appropriately sized team so that people can actually put their kids to bed and have some definition where you know the schedule.

We have a great caregivers resource group. They've sent out lists with what helps. Don't keep changing the time of a conference call because we're making arrangements. Small things like that. Lunchtime is not good for people whose kids are not in school. So let's make sure we're aware of these things—helpful everyday tips that make it more manageable and more honest for people, because we're all feeling this way. There's nobody who's finding this to be easy.

BS: What keeps you up at night?

KK: The thing I worry most about is how we restore the connections, and how we make sure that our associates and our counsel are getting mentored, are feeling connected to the firm. The last year everyone has understood that we're in an environment where that has had to be approached differently, but I want people to be able to feel the way I felt early on in my career—that feeling of connection, friendship, camaraderie. I wish there was a magic answer as to how we plug that back in, but that definitely is on my mind as one of the biggest challenges ahead.

The other thing is I am a huge believer and mover on diversity and inclusion and it keeps me up that we can't do better as an industry in every respect. It's shameful.

Ben Seal is managing editor of The American Lawyer. He joined the magazine in February 2018, and previously spent five years working for The Legal Intelligencer, editing the paper's magazines and supplements and reporting on Pennsylvania's state courts, legislature and Attorney General's Office. Contact him at bseal@alm.com or @BSealTAL.