



JAKE DEAN

WOMAN POWER: Partners at Taber Estes Thorne & Carr, from left, Jessica Thorne, Dawn Estes, Jane Taber, Melanie Okon and Lori Carr, abandoned the big-law firm environment to thrive in a smaller, woman-owned legal shop that offers a high level of personal service and alternative fee structures.

IDEAS IN ACTION

Breaking the mold

WOMAN-OWNED LAW FIRM TABER ESTES THORNE & CARR BUCKS BIG CORPORATE LAW ENVIRONMENT TO SERVE A DIVERSE CLIENT BASE

BY LENA DIRBASHI / STAFF WRITER

When veteran litigation attorney Dawn Estes didn't win her campaign for judge in Dallas in 2006, she found a silver lining in a new opportunity.

"When you run for something, you meet a lot of people, a lot of lawyers, people who saw different perspectives," Estes said. "So I started looking into this idea of doing

something different."

Estes, along with three colleagues, launched Taber Estes Thorne & Carr PLLC in 2008.

The partners — Jane Taber, Jessica Thorne, Lori Carr and Estes — had worked together for many years at Gardere Wynne Sewell in Dallas, where they counseled a number of Fortune 100 companies and



BIGGEST CHALLENGE

As the firm continues to grow, Taber Estes Thorne & Carr tries to derail potential price hikes. The growth is exponential, Estes said, slowly bringing it closer to the big law firms the partners have left behind. The challenge is to find the balance without sacrificing the quality of services.

TABER: *Litigation work rose in 2009*

represented high-profile clients in a wide range of litigation, employment disputes and other legal matters.

Through Taber Estes Thorne & Carr, they would provide senior-level legal expertise in a small-firm environment, emphasizing personal service and flexibility to accommodate a diverse client base. The firm handles commercial litigation, labor and employment matters, regulatory and administrative issues involving health care and insurance, general corporate law and alternative dispute resolution.

Since its launch, the law firm has grown significantly, in both numbers of clients and staff. Starting with five attorneys and two secretaries in 2008, Taber Estes Thorne & Carr expects to employ 12 attorneys, three paralegals and four staff members by June.

Melanie Okon, who's practice areas include energy and construction litigation, was added as a fifth partner last summer.

The firm's projected revenue this year is \$4.7 million. The two primary reasons for growth, Estes said, are the diverse backgrounds of her partners and the devoted clientèle from years of established credibility in the litigation industry.

But Estes admits that giving up the regal eminence of big corporate law after 20 years was challenging. "It was difficult because we didn't have the infrastructure built and we had to learn how to do things like fixing the copy machine ourselves," she said.

The sacrifice was not without rewards.

By cutting overhead costs and working with a smaller staff, clients are no longer constrained by the hierarchy typical in corporate law firms. "We get more involved and become more accessible rather than pushing (the work) down," Estes said.

As a result, the firm is able to keep rates low and flexible. The rate structure, which includes creative billing and blended rates, paved a way to create and maintain more long-term relationships with high-profile clients including AIG, AT&T Inc. and Atrium Cos. Inc.

Additionally, Taber Estes Thorne & Carr is a woman-owned law firm, one of the few in the Southwest. "We stick out because we are women," Estes said. "But that's not what makes us better."

Bill Moore, general counsel for Dallas-based Luminant Generation Co., which was represented by Estes in 2009, agrees.

"Dawn stood out in terms of responsiveness and enthusiasm where she dived in and grasped issues producing high-quality product that is well written and easy reading, whereas some lawyers are not as adept," he said. "They are a great example of how you can thrive as a woman-owned business ... dedicated to high-quality service."

There are some misconceptions about an all-woman law firm, Estes said. "People have an idea that we have these slumber parties and paint each others' toenails," she said. "But we are lawyers first."

The law firm made news when it hired its first male attorney in October 2009.

LEGAL STRATEGY

NAME: Taber Estes Thorne & Carr PLLC

BUSINESS: Law firm

HEADQUARTERS: 3500 Maple Ave., Dallas 75219

OWNERSHIP: Private

TOP EXECUTIVES: Partners Jessica Thorne, Dawn Estes, Jane Taber, Lori Carr and Melanie Okon

EMPLOYEES: 19

ANNUAL REVENUE: \$4.7 million (projected, 2010)

PHONE: 214-599-4000

WEB: www.taberestes.com

"We can't have diversification without men," Estes said.

As the firm continues to grow, Taber Estes Thorne & Carr tries to derail potential price hikes. Growth is slowly bringing it closer in size to the big law firms the partners left behind. It's become a challenge for the firm to find a balance without sacrificing quality of service.

"We have a constant watchdog over maintaining (low) rates and keeping up quality," she said. "How do we do that? By hiring the right people and being cautious."

The recession has helped the firm. When the economy slowed down, litigation cases surged.

"It was countercyclical," Estes said. "We wouldn't have been filing as much (cases) if people had money coming in; it's when the money dries up, people point fingers."

The economy also has provided a pool of experienced, but out-of-work attorneys, ripe for the hiring.

"We have the benefit of having great candidates to choose from," Estes said. "It has benefited us."