

# BUSINESS

## FRESH APPROACH

### STEPPING AWAY FROM THE COOKIE-CUTTER FIRM CULTURE

Ivy League education. A sophisticated, high-stakes litigation practice. Tattoos, tee-shirts, and Pumas? It's a culture that'd be uncommon in most legal markets. But in the staid, conservative American South, it's truly disruptive.

And yet, in a converted industrial loft space in Atlanta, Philadelphia native John Da Grosa Smith and a band of outsiders at Smith LLC revel in defying convention. That starts with culture.

In founding the firm in 2008, Smith sought out lawyers with impeccable credentials, a facility for sophisticated work, and more than a bit of an independent streak. "As diverse and dynamic as Atlanta is, the legal community is homogenous: the same people from the same law schools doing the same formulaic, conventional work. I created

something different," he explains.

And so, gone was the typical Midtown-Atlanta office. And the face-time requirements: one of the firm's attorneys drafts briefs from a tent while rock-climbing. "Whatever keeps people inspired," adds Smith. Gone too was the Atlanta-lawyer dress code, as pleated khakis and bowties gave way to Versace, beards, and jeans. And in came a creative, Socratic culture with a very flat hierarchy. "In a lot of firms, the partner's idea wins because it came from the partner. That wouldn't work here. I didn't want it to. We all contribute to the brainstorming process and the best ideas win," says Smith.

The firm stands out in Atlanta for good reason. Smith grew up, attended law school, and began his career in Philadelphia. The city's people are renowned for their toughness and Smith is no exception—stories about his fearlessness approach legend among the firm's attorneys. In two years

as an Assistant District Attorney in Philadelphia, Smith developed the approach he'd later build into the firm: "You prepare. You don't relent. And you learn to get very quickly to the heart of the matter and then find a smart, visceral, memorable way to present your argument."

The firm's work bears this out, with results as progressive and unique as the process that creates them. To show that an opponent in a commercial case was supplying its own meaning of contract terms, the firm incorporated its own Mad-Libs figure into a brief. In a federal RICO case involving the systematic withholding of information, it means an in-court argument structured around the ancient Indian proverb of the blind men and the elephant. Footnote citations from Plutarch to Star Wars crop up as well.

For Smith, creating distinctive work is about more than letting the firm and its lawyers stand out. It's about effective advocacy: "Doing smart, inspired work that stands out gives our clients something they can't get elsewhere. It gets the attention of our overworked courts. And it makes us hard to deal with for opposing counsel."

Smith sees the firm expanding its mission in Atlanta and its new Philadelphia office. "We will grow the team here in Atlanta and handpick the right people to help us build out our presence in Philly," says Smith. Whatever the future holds, it will be anything but expected.

Article by, Collin Freer, Attorney at Smith LLC

