

GCs Name Most Elite Law Firms

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, New York (April 22, 2015, 5:03 PM ET) -- Twenty-six law firms identified by general counsel as having the most elite, and sought after, brands all share a proven ability to offer forward-thinking advice to clients and innovate in an industry often criticized for clinging to old-school approaches, according to a new survey of corporate counsel.

The list of firms that best distinguished their brand from the pack over the past year in the minds of discerning corporate counsel was compiled by The BTI Consulting Group in its report, BTI Brand Elite 2015: Client Perceptions of the Best-Branded Law Firms. Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP, Jones Day, Baker & McKenzie LLP, Kirkland & Ellis LLP and Latham & Watkins LLP have been the top five sweethearts of inside counsel two years running.

“While many law firms are hitting the radar on some level, few are able to break through the noise and truly differentiate their law firm in the market,” the report said. “The firms doing this are the BTI Brand Elite.”

For the fourth straight year, Skadden topped the list, with one general counsel saying about the firm, “They are the epitome of a high-powered, bet-the-company type of firm.”

According to BTI President Michael Rynowecer, these “best of the best” firms do not rise to the top and then stay there through luck; they make deliberate decisions about branding that impact the way they are seen by existing and potential clients.

The firms were rated by inside counsel based on perceptions of performance in areas identified as those that most impact hiring. Both Skadden and Jones Day, the top two firms in 2015, increased their scores from previous years, rather than remaining steady and stagnant in their top spots.

“These firms have developed a cultural advantage that allows them to continue to improve on the client experience. Firms that can build this cultural advantage have a real edge in the market because they’ve built an expectation that they’ll always be in front,” Rynowecer said.

While the report doesn’t show frequent movement into and out of the club of the most elite brands, a few firms flouted that trend this year. Among them, DLA Piper, which moved from No. 21 to No. 8 and Foley & Lardner, which jumped 12 spots to No. 10.

Both firms have found a niche in the past couple of years and driven home consistent messages that

they are experts in an exclusive area, offering a focused image of how their brand can be differentiated from the rest of the legal market, Rynowecer said.

DLA Piper developed a webinar and blog on global privacy and data protection and has piped up to serve as an expert voice on both the business and legal implications of trends in that area, BTI's president said. And the firm backs up the effort "with horsepower" by sending out emails and trumpeting the blog on social media and their website.

Rynowecer said Foley & Lardner took a similar path by making a decision two or three years ago to delve deep into a specific area: advanced manufacturing and innovation. The firm has done its homework and can offer clients insightful advice on the business and legal impacts of advanced manufacturing on the global economy, he said.

"These firms have clearly selected an area of great interest to corporate counsel and invested heavily in those areas, ensuring that the information they're going to provide to clients is new and not seen before," BTI's president said.

In ranked order, the report's 26 firms with elite brands are Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP, Jones Day, Baker & McKenzie LLP, Kirkland & Ellis LLP, Latham & Watkins LLP, Sidley Austin LLP, Gibson Dunn & Crutcher LLP, DLA Piper, Sullivan & Cromwell LLP, Foley & Lardner LLP, Norton Rose Fulbright, Seyfarth Shaw LLP, K&L Gates LLP, Hogan Lovells, Alston & Bird LLP, Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, Wachtell Lipton Rosen & Katz, Faegre Baker Daniels, Mayer Brown LLP, Davis Polk & Wardwell LLP, Bryan Cave LLP, Greenberg Traurig LLP, Reed Smith LLP, McDermott Will & Emery LLP, McGuireWoods LLP and Littler Mendelson PC.

To reach its results, BTI conducted 648 telephone interviews in 2014 with legal decision makers at organizations with \$1 billion or more in revenue, probing them on which firms have superior brand equity. Factors included what firms are most recommended as a primary law firm by corporate counsel, how likely a firm is to be an industry leader over the long term, and which firm is the safest choice for bet-the-company matters and other high-risk work, among other criteria.

--Editing by Rebecca Flanagan.