

The Business of Law

Attorney Handles Fast-Paced, High-Profile Deals



MAX MORSE PHOTOS

San Francisco-based corporate attorney Jack Helfand, JD '94, has worked dozens of marquee deals—including brokering the sale of MySpace to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, acting as IPO counsel to cyber-security giant McAfee, and restructuring Converse Corporation from bankruptcy. But with today's tight money and uncertainty, he's advising his clients to "hunker down."

“Big or small, it is thrilling to help entrepreneurs accomplish their dreams.” JACK HELFAND

GROWING UP WITH A FATHER who worked as an executive at an investment bank, alumnus Jack Helfand says he acquired “a keen interest in the markets” at an early age. But it wasn’t until Helfand enrolled in Washington University Law that he got his first glimpse of the career path that has led him to specialize in capital-markets legal work and mergers and acquisitions for some of America’s fastest growing, high-profile companies.

“At Washington University, I learned all the things that lawyers can do—and that all lawyers are not like F. Lee Bailey,” Helfand says.

After law school, he returned to his native Chicago to work with the international mega-firm of Mayer Brown LLP. Three years later, he was recruited to join one of America’s premier technology law firms, Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati PC, of Palo Alto, California.

“I left Chicago for Silicon Valley because of the enormous opportunities there for health science and technology companies,” Helfand says. “Remember when all you heard was how these new-age companies were transforming the way we live, work, and communicate? Well, I am still a believer. While I have worked for countless companies that failed, I am heartened by my work for the many businesses that have gone on to be successful; some have products that are now a regular part of daily life.”

FOR SIX YEARS, Helfand handled securities and capital-markets deals for investment banks such as Morgan Stanley and J.P. Morgan and tech companies such as InfoSpace, Network Associates, and McAfee. “I worked on pretty much all of McAfee’s mergers and acquisitions from 1998 to 2004,” he recalls.

But he also played pivotal roles in significant matters outside high-tech—like the Crocs initial public offering and the sale of Converse Corporation to Nike, Inc. His know-how in venture-capital transactions, mergers and acquisitions, and IPOs led to “a pretty exciting opportunity” with the San Francisco investment bank of Thomas Weisel Partners, as general counsel with responsibility for investment banking and private equity. There he advised the firm’s investment professionals, structured and represented several private-equity fund families, and was a member of the bank’s capital commitment committee.

But in 2008, with capital tightening and IPOs shrinking (there was only one NASDAQ initial public offering during a

four-month period that year), he realized that a lawyer might soon be a luxury at an investment bank. So he joined former colleagues from Wilson Sonsini and became one of four partners at the boutique transaction firm of Hayden Bergman Rooney PC in San Francisco. The firm has an active transactional practice representing premier technology firms in Silicon Valley.

“The investment bank gave me a great perspective on the coming events and was a big contributor to my return to private M&A practice this past summer,” Helfand notes. In contrast to other recent economic downturns, he observes, the current economic crisis “hit the monied sector first.”

“Wall Street will be working without bonuses for the foreseeable future, but I’m convinced that Main Street doesn’t fully get it yet,” Helfand says. “There’s a real premium now on survivability.”

So he’s telling his clients to tighten their belts and conserve cash—to stay creative and innovative, but to “hunker down” for the time being.

Despite market and economic vagaries, Helfand revels in his intellectually challenging work. “Unlike litigation—which can be a zero-sum game, where one side succeeds at the other’s expense—a well-done corporate deal can result in both sides considering themselves winners,” Helfand observes.

“BIG OR SMALL, it is thrilling to help entrepreneurs accomplish their dreams,” he continues. “I enjoy working with business risk-takers. Usually, a company going public or engaging in M&A has beaten the odds. Being a small part of their success is very rewarding.”

Helfand credits Washington University Law for helping to prepare him as a corporate lawyer. In particular, he recalls David M. Becker, now the Joseph H. Zumbalen Professor Emeritus of the Law of Property and associate dean for external relations, telling Helfand and his classmates not to underestimate the impact they could have on the law. “At the time, it sounded like ‘professor-babble.’ But as I get more perspective, I have to agree. For example, I participated in drafting the first registration statement for an e-mail marketing company nearly 10 years ago. Since then, I’ve seen our work recycled in numerous deals.”

A solid education plus passion is the formula for achievement, Helfand says: “While certainly not limited to corporate law, it is obvious that commitment and education are the secrets of success. Most jobs are attainable, if you are the person who wants it the most.” IIII