



ceocfointerviews.com

© All rights reserved

Issue: March 13, 2023

Abstone Lalley DeNio, Inc. – Law Firm Consultants and Strategists Rebrand to Reflect Their Continued Commitment to Promoting Diversity In the National Legal Industry



Sara DeNio
CEO

Abstone Lalley DeNio, Inc.

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
CEOCFO Magazine

CEOCFO: Ms. DeNio, Abstone Lalley recently rebranded to Abstone Lalley DeNio. What is the company focus right now? Why the change?

Ms. DeNio: We recently celebrated our company's 10 year anniversary. In anticipation of that milestone, my business partner and the company's Chief Strategy & Mergers and Acquisitions Officer, Rodney Abstone-Carabajal and I began discussing a rebranding effort to highlight our five key service areas and refresh our branding through the launch of a new website. Another reason for the rebranding was the addition of my name to the company, which prior to that was Abstone Lalley, Inc.

Rodney approached me some time ago and said, "Look, we are known for our work in the diversity space, we ourselves are a very diverse company, you are someone who has been involved with this company since the beginning and helped build it into what it is today. We need to have you reflected in the brand of this company." Now, as Abstone Lalley DeNio, or ALD, Inc. as we like to call it. We have a woman, who is also a Shareholder, now reflected in the company name.

As I mentioned, another reason for our rebranding was to highlight our key service areas. As a boutique that focuses exclusively on law firms, we have really become known for our expertise in diversity partner recruiting and other diversity consulting services, which is often what we are sought out for by our clients. However, we also specialize in Mergers & Acquisitions Strategy and Consulting; Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Consulting; Succession Planning; and Strategic Marketing. We have had considerable success in these areas, with a strong focus on diversity. For example, we represented two minority-owned law firms, one in the Midwest and the other on the West Coast, in a merger that created one of the largest and most prominent national, minority-owned law firms. In this instance, we served as advisors to the deal, as well as independent advisors to both firms.

Diversity is a huge struggle for the legal community nationally. A lack of diversity within firms is still a major concern. Although many law firms recognize the issue, they are struggling to fix it, not because of a lack of desire, but just because they do not really know how. That is where we come in. Diversity is embedded in the culture of our company. As a diverse team of consultants and strategists with extensive knowledge about and particular expertise in the national legal market, we can help our law firm clients achieve real, impactful change throughout their organization.

CEOCFO: What do you understand about the problem, and more so the solution, in the area of diversity, equity and inclusion?

Ms. DeNio: While DEI is certainly being talked about more nowadays, it is not just a fad or temporary issue that needs to be addressed. In the legal community specifically, lack of diversity in law firms is a real issue that can only be remedied when there is an authentic commitment to improving diversity that is felt throughout the firm. And most importantly, starting with the firm's leadership.

Many firms are trying to change the way that they have been doing things, and much of that is also being demanded of them by their corporate clientele. Those companies are saying, "We want our representation to be diverse, and we want diverse attorneys working on our matters." As firms look to diversify within themselves, they have to look beyond the aspect of hiring. It is not enough to simply hire more diverse attorneys. They need to figure out the inclusion and retention piece in order to make sure the attorneys that they bring in are happy, and want to stay there, and want to grow within the firm.



Firms that have a genuine interest in improving diversity may not necessarily know where to begin. There is no simple or one size fits all solution. True commitment to change requires support from firm leaders and an understanding that this change won't happen overnight. It requires a long-term approach that takes a deep dive into the firm - its culture, inclusive practices, etc. and can sometimes bring uncomfortable findings to light. But, if a firm is willing to address those issues, it can be transformational for the firm, its attorneys and staff, and its clients.

"We have an international reach. Outside of the U.S., our reach extends mainly to South America and Europe. While the focus of our legal recruiting is within the United States, our consulting services that focus on mergers and acquisitions, law firm marketing, DE&I, and succession planning have international reach." Sara DeNio

CEOCFO: What might be some of the common issues at most law firms, where you have somewhat of an easy answer, or an easy direction? What are some more "firm by firm" challenges that you need to address?

Ms. DeNio: It really does vary, firm by firm. I think that many law firms are starting to address a lack of diversity at the point of hiring. That is kind of the natural tendency. They may think, "If we can hire more diverse attorneys, that is the first step in the right direction." However, once they start to do that, as I mentioned before, they have to shift their focus and really start to figure out, "What do we need to do to keep these attorneys engaged, and how can we support them within our firm."

When we're brought into a firm to consult on DE&I, we help them take a holistic look at what they are doing to attract diverse talent, as well as what they are doing internally to support their diverse attorneys. Our goal is to help our clients create a culture of openness and inclusion. Through a variety of methods, we help to determine strategic solutions, whether they be short term or long term, to keep diverse attorneys engaged and fulfilled in the work that they are doing,

discuss opportunities for mentorship and professional development, and how they are being involved in client work. These are all factors that have been shown to be drivers of long-term success within firms.



CEOCFO: What have you learned coming up through the ranks. You have seen how your company works, so what might you understand that people who may be just starting out do not get?

Ms. DeNio: When I started with the company, I began in a marketing and client relations role, as my background is in marketing and public relations. To go back to the beginning, Rodney and I had met in a prior workplace. We became fast friends, and knew that we were going to work together in some capacity or another. Therefore, when he started his own company, which was Abstone Lalley, he called on me as a friend to help him sort through some ideas and discuss marketing, and that is how I got started with the company. It was unofficial at first, and then I came on officially in the role of Director of Marketing and Business Development.

My goal was to build the company's client base from the ground up. We both had a network of clients and candidates from working in the legal industry, so we started out strong with a robust referral network. Building the business has always been exciting and something that we both have been passionate about doing. As I transitioned into the role of COO, and eventually CEO, my responsibilities changed to include a heavier focus on operations, but continuing to build and evolve the company has remained an exciting adventure.

I would say one of the most important things I have learned from working my way through various roles of increasing responsibility, is how I want to be involved in a company, and how I want that company to feel. From day one, our company has focused on the importance of relationships. Relationships with clients and with the consultants who work for us. As the person who hires and manages our team, I have always felt that we are hiring smart, professional, brilliant people who do not need be micromanaged. They can be autonomous in their work, but we can still have a collegial team environment. Rodney and I want our consultants to feel supported and fulfilled in the great work they are doing, but also know that we care about them as individuals beyond work. This mindset is embedded into our company culture. This is why we have so many established, long-term relationships with clients, many of whom have become friends.

CEOCFO: When you are talking with a prospective client, maybe a client that you have worked with before, how do you consult with them to understand what their culture is, to understand if their heart is really in the diversity/equity arena, or if they are doing it to check off the boxes? Does it matter if they get the end results in how you work with them?

Ms. DeNio: It does matter. It matters a lot. There's not a law firm out there that doesn't have a DEI page front and center on their website. With clients demanding that their counsel be more diverse, it really puts the pressure on law firms to amp up their diversity and inclusion efforts.

When we meet with firms or a firm reaches out to us about our DE&I services, you can tell in that initial conversation if the commitment is genuine. While there are still some firms that are looking for a quick fix via hiring, we are finding that more and more firms truly want to become more inclusive, and it's refreshing to see the buy-in for that coming from the top of these organizations. And, they understand that it is a long process. You can definitely have an authentic commitment to wanting to make a change within your organization, but that is not going to happen overnight. Therefore,

when we initially meet with firms, it is laying the groundwork for what is the goal, and how are we going to achieve that, and here are the steps that we need to put in place to achieve that. Those steps can encompass many different areas, but usually include recruiting and a DEI assessment.

Our Chief Diversity & Inclusion Strategist, Dr. Dianne Piper, who is a nationally-renowned DE&I expert and an attorney, leads our DE&I consulting services. During client engagements, she is having very honest conversations with management committees. She is putting together questionnaires that are being sent out to all of the attorneys and staff within the firm to gauge feelings about diversity, and how that is playing out in the everyday life of the individuals who are working within the firm. Then, she is taking those results and analyzing them, and coming back to the firm with areas of opportunity and actionable steps on how to achieve meaningful change.

CEOFCO: How do you reach out to let people know about all of your services? What, if anything, has changed as you are focusing a bit more on the diversity side?

Ms. DeNio: Since the beginning, our focus has always been on nurturing relationships. For that reason, we have established a tremendous network of professionals within the legal community and are fortunate that much of our business comes to us through referrals. Over the past few years, we've become known for our work in the diversity space and clients often seek us out specifically for those consulting and recruiting capabilities. We've also had a tremendous amount of success in this area. As I previously mentioned, we successfully merged two diversity-owned law firms and designed diversity-focused marketing and business development pieces on behalf of our clients. To support the rebranding moving forward, we will be placing a larger focus on outboard marketing efforts this year. We plan to launch several email and other digital marketing campaigns focused on our various service areas.

CEOFCO: Abstone Lalley DeNio has a global reach. Would you tell us a bit about the international side of the company? Is that something that you are looking to grow, or that is growing organically?

Ms. DeNio: You're correct. We have an international reach. Outside of the U.S., our reach extends mainly to South America and Europe. While the focus of our legal recruiting is within the United States, our consulting services that focus on mergers and acquisitions, law firm marketing, DE&I, and succession planning have international reach. For example, we have represented a European-based law firm that was looking to adopt a presence in the United States through a merger with or acquisition of a U.S. law firm. And yes, all of our growth into new markets has been organic. We never decided to pursue a new market simply to be in that particular market. We've always moved into new markets as our business demands have needed us there.

CEOFCO: What do you see for the next year or so? What might you implement? What might you change that is going on at Abstone Lalley DeNio, to enhance what you would like to do?

Ms. DeNio: Over the next year, I see us continuing to grow and expand our business, particularly in the areas of DE&I, M&A consulting, succession planning, and strategic marketing. For example, we have this beautiful new website that was created as part of our rebranding. Web design and copywriting are services that we offer as part of our strategic marketing portfolio. As we continue to expand this area of our business, I would love to help even more law firms take a holistic look at their marketing efforts in an effort to enhance their brand, especially as it relates to diversity. I see ALD, Inc. continuing on a path of strategic growth by building on prior successes and maintaining our focus on DE&I.

CEOFCO: What, if anything, might a prospective client miss, or not quite understand about Abstone Lalley DeNio that they need to know?

Ms. DeNio: The main thing that I hope perspective clients come to know about us is that we practice what we preach. We have experience and success in the diversity space because we, ourselves, are a diverse team of individuals who also have the expertise to get them where they want to be. We exemplify every aspect of diversity, from racial diversity, to gender diversity, to age diversity, to diversity of sexual orientation. We embody it all - our whole team - which I think really speaks to the authenticity behind the services that we offer. By drawing from our varied experiences and backgrounds, we come to the table with so many unique ideas and perspectives, and together, we can offer all of that to our clients.