

# Wisconsin Law Journal

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## GONZALEZ GROWTH

Milwaukee-based firm doubles in size despite economy

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When attorney Gerardo H. Gonzalez started what is now Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan LLP in 1989, he hoped the law firm would find its niche in Milwaukee.

But the former solo practitioner and partners David R. Saggio and Emery K. Harlan could not have predicted where the practice would be 20 years later. Particularly surprising is the growth it has experienced the last two years, doubling in size during a time when the economy has forced many businesses to halt hiring or even downsize.

In 2007, the firm had 42 attorneys in five offices around the country. After several expansions including the addition of two law offices in Los Angeles and Phoenix on Jan. 1, 2009, the firm now has 90 lawyers working in 11 locations and is one of the largest minority-owned firms in the nation.

So what is the secret to their success?

Gonzalez said it is a matter of taking calculated risks, finding the best talent and not expanding for the sake of expanding.

"I don't think there has been any particular magic beyond fundamental good business practices coupled with talent," Gonzalez said. "We always had a vision of growth, but there has never been a specific number behind that. It has always been the people who have been a deciding factor as to where we go and not the location."

Rather than immediately establishing branches in legal hubs like New York or Chicago, the first cities outside of Milwaukee that Gonzalez expanded to were Des Moines, Iowa, Cincinnati, and Gary, Ind.

"We'd rather be in a secondary

market that has the right fit for the firm then in a primary market where the people aren't in tune with our service philosophy," Gonzalez said.

University of Wisconsin Management and Human Resources Professor Mason Carpenter said that even though the economy would preclude many businesses from expanding, some can buck the trend, depending on their business strategy.

Carpenter said one of the pitfalls for growing law firms or any business is relying too heavily on one client, something which Gonzalez has been able to avoid even though it primarily represents household name Fortune 500 companies.

"You look at some of those large firms that built their practice around a company like Enron," Carpenter said. "When that client goes away, so does that business."

He also said that one of the risks associated with rapid expansion is a company's ability to maintain quality and administrative oversight is something which can hinder the success of a businesses' expansion.

"As a business grows, there are a lot of bodies to keep track of so quality control can be an issue," Carpenter said.

Gonzalez said maintaining high quality is something the firm focuses on when expanding into new markets.

"We won't compromise quality as we grow internally, but partners do have to be careful that one person is



Pictured: Gerardo H. Gonzalez (r) and Gregory M. Wesley of Gonzalez Saggio & Harlan LLP

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**Gonzalez expands**

**January 2007**  
**Firm has 42 attorneys in five offices - Milwaukee, Chicago, Cincinnati, Des Moines and Indianapolis.**

**Jan. 1, 2008**  
**Firm has 63 attorneys, adding four offices in Cleveland, Las Vegas, New York and Washington D.C.**

**Jan. 1, 2009**  
**Firm has 90 attorneys with two more offices in Los Angeles and Phoenix.**



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