

*The National Law Journal's* inaugural Midsize Hot List represents 20 law firms across the country that have demonstrated creative, innovative strategies to stay competitive. From piles of nominations received, we've selected firms that have found new ways to recruit and retain top talent, develop practice areas, manage their operations and position themselves to stay on track during the economic upheaval.

Midsize law firms haven't managed to completely dodge the recession's punch, but they have proven more agile than their bigger competitors.

The recession has delivered a savage blow to many law firm giants. Layoffs, employment deferrals and full-blown failures of firms have revealed some deep flaws in the big-law business model.

In many cases, midsize law firms—between 50 and 300 lawyers, for our purposes—have been more adept in addressing clients' concerns about price constraints, their frustrations with traditional billing structures and their desire to staff matters efficiently.

Staff reporter Jeff Jeffrey and regular NLJ contributor Roger Adler put together the 20 thumbnail profiles of each firm. We recognize that many more firms could have made the list. That said, those included here have shown the nimbleness and adaptability that come from lean operations and strong client ties.

—LEIGH JONES



## MUCH SHELIST DENENBERG AMENT & RUBENSTEIN

When it comes to size, Chicago-based Much Shelist Denenberg Ament & Rubenstein is proud to be middle-of-the-road. In fact, two years ago the 85-lawyer firm launched an advertising campaign to say loud and clear that it had no intention of getting caught up in the merger frenzy going on at the time. Much Shelist's "Cut Loose" campaign took aim at large, brand-name law firms with lines such as, "Mega law firm mania may be all the rage, but at what cost to clients and the attorneys who serve them?"

Managing partner David Brown said that the aggressive approach was necessary for the firm to raise its profile in Chicago and Irvine, Calif.,

where it also maintains an office.

"We don't want to be the Chicago office of fill in the blank," Brown said. That strategy paid off. During the first year of the firm's "Cut Loose" campaign, Much Shelist picked up 12 laterals who brought more than 70 new clients to the firm and opened nearly 220 new matters.

To better meet client needs, the firm embeds lawyers at client sites, enters into alternative billing arrangements, and sends out detailed surveys to find out what issues they may be facing. In February, the firm implemented a 10% reduction in all lawyer salaries to further cut back on expenses.