

Special Report: **Real estate**

Going global

A collaboration aims to take on large, international firms by staying local

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Norm Liedtke of Meyer Design in Ardmore and Ron Carlson, a counterpart out in Chicago with the firm Partners by Design Inc., had been working together for 15 years on various projects when they decided to join forces — with a twist.

The duo formed One Global Design, an alliance of like-minded, entrepreneurial design firms that will take care of clients' needs no matter what city a project is in.

So far, Liedtke and Carlson have recruited 14 firms that have offices in major cities across the United States including the Canadian cities of Vancouver, Calgary and Toronto, and are looking to include firms in Europe and the Far East.

"It's driven by clients and where they are," Liedtke said.

While not exactly the same, One Global is akin to a Young Presidents Association but with a narrower focus. One Global Design was born from the frustration of competing with national and international firms that sell clients on the idea that they can service projects in any



Norman Liedtke (left) and Ron Carlson formed One Global Design.

city because they had offices all over.

"That is their big hammer," Carlson said.

One way to counter that is to merge with a large firm with an expanded footprint to penetrate other cities.

"That was the antithesis of what we wanted to do," Carlson said. "The firms they acquired have their own culture, fire and energy. Over and over again, they come in and ruin the culture and the roots that made you successful."

Under the One Global Design umbrella, each firm that joins the group keeps its own identity, culture and ownership. Under this model, clients work

with principals of a firm and get local expertise that a home-based firm might not have cultivated in another city.

For example, a member firm in Atlanta has a client that needs work done in Rhode Island so that firm asked Meyer, which is licensed in Rhode Island, to do the work for them.

When a firm is recruited, it signs a two-page memo of understanding; however, there are no hard-and-fast rules because every client and project is different. For the most part, those firms that have been invited to join are like minded and have clients' interests at the forefront, Liedtke said. Annual dues are nominal and there

are biweekly national conference calls and two annual meetings.

Bob Fox of Fox Architects in Washington, D.C., has worked with Carlson and Liedtke on various projects and decided that joining One Global could help his firm win work. While clients invite Fox to compete on projects, there are times when clients wonder how the firm will handle something in other parts of the country, Fox said.

"One Global serves us well in that capacity," Fox said. "Our large, more national clients can be served and we bring individually owned firms that a client can deal directly with an owner and clients get more personal attention. We can leverage that."

While taking care of clients and their needs is what drove Liedtke and Carlson to form One Global, an unintended benefit has been the sharing of best practices.

"When you put 10 to 13 entrepreneurial owners together in a room there's intellectual capital, suggestions on ways to improve processes, and ideas that you otherwise wouldn't get," Liedtke said.

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