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Close-Up: Amar Thakur

Sheppard Mullin's 'high-energy' attorney aims to elevate firm's IP status

SAN DIEGO — Dozens of intellectual property firms dot the San Diego legal landscape, servicing the city's biotech- and telecom-rich community.

National IP firms are setting up offices in the region with increasing frequency, accelerating the competition for lucrative clients.

In this crowded field, Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton LLP isn't the most well-known — if known at all — participant.

Amar Thakur is trying to change that.

The 37-year-old attorney has brought high energy, high aspirations and a portfolio stuffed with high-quality clients to Sheppard Mullin since joining the firm in summer 2004.

Under his tutelage, the firm has outgrown its original, 30,000-square-foot Del Mar offices, moving into a sparkling 54,000-square-foot space last fall that can hold as many as 72 attorneys.

His building skills haven't gone unnoticed in firm headquarters, and he was recently named cochair of Sheppard Mullin's national intellectual property practice group.

Without much prompting, Sheppard Mullin executive chairman

Guy Halgren starts ticking off adjectives to describe Thakur: "High-energy, focused, team builder, successful, great with people, smart.

"He really understands the business aspects of practicing law," Halgren continued. "Amar understands how IP is a key component of a client's business, so he has a way of not treating it as a separate discipline, but as part of the business."

A British-born Indian, Thakur came to the United States to attend college when he was 17. He seriously considered going to business school, but most required work experience and, as a foreign student, he couldn't stay stateside for that.

He settled on law school, but he has managed to incorporate his love of business into his practice, which is a mix of IP licensing and litigation. Photo: J. Kat Woronowicz

"My practice is a lot of IP counseling, so I really do provide in my



Amar Thakur

day-to-day practice a lot of business advice to my clients," he said. "My practice is heavily devoted toward advising clients on how to look at their IP portfolio, how to grow it, how to maximize the commercial value of it."

Building Sheppard Mullin's intellectual property practice in San Diego enabled Thakur to showcase his business development skills as well.

"I've always had a big entrepreneurial aspect to my personality," he said.

Thakur gave his new firm immediate credibility by bringing over work from several of his previous clients, including Broadcom Inc. (Nasdaq: BRCM), Flarion Technologies Inc., Verus Pharmaceuticals and Xifin.

He then reached out to Sheppard Mullin clients who weren't using the firm for their intellectual property needs, notably Amgen (Nasdaq: AMGN), Wireless Facilities (Nasdaq: WFII) and Expedia (Nasdaq: EXPE).

Thakur continued the overhaul by adding members to the practice group, bringing in like-minded, young associates and laterals who shared his passion for growth.

"Our associates are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and to go out and develop clients and build the practice," Thakur said. "I encourage them to do it. I take them to pitches. I talk to them about it. Since it's a focus of mine, I make it a focus of theirs."

Sheppard Mullin now has 16

Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton LLP

Del Mar Heights address: 12275 El Camino Real, Suite 200, San Diego, CA 92130

Web page: www.sheppardmullin.com

Phone: (858) 720-8900

Fax: (858) 509-3691

Year established: 2001

Number of attorneys: 44

Total number of offices: 10 (7 in California; also in New York, Washington D.C., Shanghai)

Total number of attorneys: 480

Year firm founded: 1927

intellectual property attorneys in the Del Mar office. Thakur anticipates adding nine more in the next year. And he'd like to add a seasoned life-sciences professional, who, in turn, could bring along a group of five other attorneys.

"He's totally transformed it," Halgren said, referring to the IP practice in San Diego. "He's a tremendously high-energy person who's not interested in the status quo. He always wants to build a business to serve the clients. He brings in more talent. He's a builder."

Thakur also would like to initiate more collaboration between the intellectual property groups of Sheppard Mullin's many offices. When he first came to the firm, the San Diego staff wasn't large enough to handle all of its IP cases, but wasn't getting any other offices to share its workload.

As co-chair of the firm's national IP practice, Thakur now is building on a much bigger scale. His main focus will be on lateral recruitment, business development and media relations.

But a significant portion of his responsibilities will include growing the practice internationally.

He realizes the Sheppard Mullin name isn't as well-known in IP circles as other firms, but said it's not from a lack of talent.

"I don't think anyone would say Fish (& Richardson) has better patent litigators," Thakur said. "They've got more. I think the caliber of lawyers is

very high; it's just that we are not as large or were not historically as large."

He said the firm is already making inroads. He cited the recent acquisition of prominent patent attorney Don Pelto and his group of associates in Washington D.C.

"By selling it (the name) nationally, we are now selling ourselves to people who may have never heard of us," Thakur said. "IBM may have never heard of Sheppard Mullin when they're thinking of a lawsuit. So to get to that level of branding will take a little more time, but it is, in my opinion, achievable. It's just a slower process."

Concerned the administrative duties of leading the national IP group would interfere with his practice, Thakur convinced Sheppard Mullin to split his duties with Carlo Van den Bosch.

"It's almost overwhelming — the management time needed to get things done," Thakur said. "That's going to be a challenge." He is very happy with how the practice has grown in his short tenure. He said the name recognition will increase with time.

"We're not only attracting high-caliber people but high-caliber clients," Thakur said. "And that's very much a goal on a larger group basis ... to attract high-quality people, so it elevates the IP status of Sheppard Mullin as a whole."