



DAVE KAUP | KCBJ

Andy Haynes of Haynes Benefits says he likes to mix music with business. Since he started putting lessons to lyrics, he says he's seen a noticeable uptick in requests for his seminars, as well as the business they generate for the Lee's Summit law firm.

High notes

Growth has Haynes Benefits singing a happy tune

BY STEVE VOCKRODT | STAFF WRITER

A few years ago, Andrew Haynes was a musician without a stage.

His main act was teaching other lawyers the interwoven intricacies of the ever-changing world of employee benefits law. His main instrument was a microphone.

But that all changed one night when the Lee's Summit lawyer found himself sequestered in a Houston hotel room about nine years ago, with nothing to do but play the guitar to while away the night until the next day's seminar.

As he strummed some basic chords, he

pondered his boredom and wondered how to keep crowds at the seminars interested in the decidedly dry topic of pension and health benefits law.

Somewhat to his amazement, Haynes started penning lyrics to songs about the same benefits law topics he had lectured about countless times before.

Then the thought occurred to him that he could mix things up during the eight-hour seminars with a rollicking tune.

His self-consciousness nearly got the better of him.

"I almost didn't do it," he said. "I thought that was too silly — it was almost too much for me."

The next day on stage, facing a stone-faced crowd of lawyers, accountants and consultants, the ebullient Haynes belted out his first song, the "Hardship Distribution Blues":

*My wife is in the hospital
 The bank foreclosed on my house,
 I got two kids in college
 And another one coming out,
 I got the hardship distribution blues
 baby,
 I got immediate and heavy financial
 need
 If it weren't for these hardship distri-
 bution blues, baby
 I'd leave my money in the plan,
 guaranteed.*

HAYNES: Stinson lawyers expand offerings

And the crowd went wild. "I did it, and the audience loved it," Haynes said. "People literally started calling me the Singing Benefits Lawyer."

Since then, Haynes has seen a noticeable uptick in the number of seminars he's been invited to as well as the new business he gets from those meetings.

Haynes is still on tour with his act, which he claims brings in about one-third of the business for his small law firm, Haynes Benefits.

It's been heady times for the firm Haynes started in 2004.

The firm has tailored its benefits practice to help employers craft benefits programs, ensure ongoing compliance, resolve conflicts and disputes on plans, and help insurers develop new plans.

About 10 months ago, he scored a big hit by wooing veteran benefits lawyers Thomas Graves and Robert West from Stinson Morrison Hecker LLP.



Graves

Haynes credited Graves — whom he calls the Dean of the Benefits Bar — with instructing him early on in the complex world of benefits law. They had known each other for years through the small benefits law community in Kansas City.



West

"I was ready to take my firm to the next level, and I flat-out approached them," Haynes said. "They worked very much as a team at Stinson ... I'm just thrilled they decided to join."

For West's part, it didn't take much persuading to make the move — working in a smaller legal setting always had been somewhat of a goal of his.

"I said, gosh, this sounds like a neat opportunity and something that addresses that entrepreneurial feel that I thought I have," West said.

West said the smaller firm atmosphere

allowed him to take the front seat in his legal work for clients.

"For me, it was kind of seeking that environment and that kind of control over my practice, which is in no way a negative implication of Stinson," West said.

For Haynes, whose strength is health benefits, the new recruits allowed the firm to address the three main prongs of the benefits practice: health, taxes and pensions.

Also benefiting Haynes, who himself was the product of larger firms earlier in his career, the compact law firm environment afforded him the chance to leverage another one of his talents, which some lawyers lack: communication skills.

The folksy Haynes figured out that consultants and insurance brokers were having more success communicating and relating with clients than lawyers in part because consultants could speak about benefits in plain English, not lawyerly legalese.

"People have said this frequently — and it makes me very happy — people say: 'Andy, you don't think like a lawyer. You understand the whole industry, not just the legal side,'" Haynes said.

That's roughly what attracted Scott Raymond, corporate counsel for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Kansas, to do business with Haynes Benefits in helping craft benefit plans for its employees.

The two met at one of Haynes' seminars about a year ago in Chicago and struck up a lively conversation about one of the two things both men loved: the Kansas City Royals.

Baseball talk faded into their other passion: benefits discussion, and Raymond said he quickly realized that Haynes and his team could help with the company's benefits plan.

"Definitely the level of expertise is very helpful," Raymond said of the firm. "One thing about the size (of Haynes Benefits) is we do get pretty good client attention, and he's very accessible."

Haynes has attracted other clients through books he's written for Employee Benefits Institute of America, which also sponsors many of his seminars.

Clients vary by industry and size, but Haynes Benefits does considerable work

HAYNES BENEFITS

Description: A law firm specializing in pension, benefits and health insurance plan practices.

Top executives: Andrew Haynes

Founded: 2004

Employees: Three lawyers, five support staff

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for employee benefits at private and public colleges and universities.

Many large firms have benefits practices, but few boutique firms delve into the highly specialized practice.

Although Haynes' seminar show wins over a third of new clients, the rest come in large part from referrals.

Many referrals come from small to mid-sized law firms because they are more comfortable sending a client's benefits work to Haynes Benefits, knowing the benefits-only firm won't try to poach the rest of the client's legal work, which a large firm would be in the position to do.

And Haynes said benefits aren't an issue people take lightly, either.

"We're in an area that literally everyone running for office is talking about," Haynes said.

That has Haynes Benefits singing about the possibilities for growth. Its Lee's Summit office has walls it can knock down to make space for new lawyers when the time is right.

But growth for Haynes Benefits will mean only going upward and onward in the amount of service it can provide in benefits law — it won't consider going into other practice areas.

"We're open to (growing)," West said. "We're not on the prowl necessarily, but if the right opportunity presents itself, I think our collective goal is to have measured growth and strengthen our boutique stature and what we can offer clients."

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