

Michael Gottlieb

The Personality behind the Practice

“Michael, I’ve talked with you more in the six months since I hired you than I spoke with my previous attorney in the ten years I knew him,” remarked the client.

Initially, Michael Gottlieb wasn’t sure whether to take this as a compliment or a concern, but his client quickly clarified. “I think it speaks to how comfortable I feel working with you,” she said.

A partner at Apatoff Peters Ebersohl, LLC, Michael is markedly different from most lawyers, as his colleagues and clients often tell him. No, it’s not the fact that he loves racing cars and has participated in the sport since law school, though the evolution of this particular hobby is a fascinating story all its own. Rather, it is the fact that most attorneys are primarily comfortable with the technical aspects of their work like drafting documents. While Michael excels in this expertise, he also brings something additional to the table—a personable, friendly, refreshingly human style of interaction that allows his clients to feel truly respected and heard.

“I feel like I can learn something from every client I have, and I *want* to,” says Michael. He continues on to explain how understanding his relationship with clients can be likened to understanding the relationship between a driver and their racecar. “When the relationship works, you can go faster, accomplish more, and it’s a heck of a lot more fun,” he explains. Working with people to facilitate solutions that allow them to operate more efficiently is one area where Michael truly shines. “I love when people call just to run something past me,” he laughs.

Apatoff Peters is a small, yet prominent law firm operating out of Rockville, Maryland, that was founded in 2005 by Adam Apatoff and Craig Peters. The two joined forces because they were dissatisfied with their experiences at their then

current firms, hoping to launch a new firm that would serve the local business community with a new business model and a new verve for the industry. With Adam’s background in technology and transactional work paired with Craig’s expertise in tax, the firm has since blossomed from two to ten, attracting business through its reputation of providing downtown law firm services in exchange for a fair and reasonable fee.

Today, the attorneys of Apatoff Peters generally serve as outside general counsel to clients that tend to be privately held companies, with several publicly traded entities seeking their services as well.

Excelling at the age-old strategy of dividing and conquering, each partner at the firm possesses a unique area of expertise that complements and strengthens its collective skill set. With focuses in corporate and business law, technology, transactional work, tax, estate planning, commercial real estate, nonprofits, commercial litigation, labor, employment, and

both large and small businesses, they cover a wide breadth of specialties without sacrificing a foundation of comprehensive and in-depth specialty knowledge. Michael, for example, typically handles smaller clients ranging from startups to \$20 million in revenue. His client base is markedly diverse, and the firm addresses each step in the entire life cycle of the clients’ needs. “In this capacity, I’m the go-to person for my clients, whatever the legal issues are,” he explains. “I handle or quarterback whatever comes up, whether its litigation, sophisticated transactional matters, etcetera. If a matter lies outside my realm of expertise, I have a wealth of resources in my colleagues to assist with addressing it.”

Michael may seem to have found the ideal match in Apatoff Peters, but the road to the firm was anything but straightforward. After graduating from the Wake Forest University



School of Law in 1997, he decided to pursue his interest in technology before commencing his practice of law and accepted a position as a programmer at Anderson Consulting. He left Anderson Consulting to accept a position with Arthur Andersen, where he assisted with a business concept aimed at helping large companies capitalize on their intellectual property assets. He was then ready to begin his legal career, so he finally began practicing law at a small firm in D.C., which broke apart shortly thereafter. He then spent five years employed at a different firm in Rockville. He was on a partner track there when he was recruited to another local firm, testing the waters to see what fit best with his personality and skill set.

When Michael interviewed at Apatoff Peters in 2009, the firm was confident that his success would grow very quickly if given the latitude to build his own practice—an opportunity they happily extended to him. “I decided it was worth the risk, so I went for it,” Michael recalls.

At the time, he had been comfortable at his previous firm, making good money and considering investing in a business of some sort. He and his prospective business partner had considered an array of options, from a Laundromat to a check cashing business, but nothing had really spoken to them. “The idea of leaving my old firm was tremendously nerve-racking, but my wife provided great insight and advice by suggesting that if I was going to invest in any business, it should be my own law practice,” he says. “Then, I realized that my ‘happy place’ wasn’t about the firm, it was the type of work I was doing and who I was doing it for, i.e., my clients. Once I started representing local companies on a regular basis, I found that I loved what I did, and I love running into my clients around the community.” Since accepting the position with Apatoff Peters and leveraging the new resources at his disposal, Michael’s book of business has tripled. With the risk-reward paying off and the feeling of both finding and hitting his own unique stride, he considers himself extremely fortunate to have arrived at where he is today.

This deeply-rooted yearning to connect with people in a meaningful way perhaps stems from Michael’s childhood, the terrain of which was largely defined by the six marriages and five divorces collectively claimed by his parents. As a result, Michael and his sister were raised primarily

by a single working mom who didn’t have time for an extensive social circle. “As I got older, however, I learned that the better you play with others, the more fun life is,” he reflects now. “I never had a sense of community when I was younger, and achieving these types of bonds now is a strong driving force for me.”

Michael’s success stems not only from the fact that he thrives on fostering genuine and fruitful client relationships, but also from the simple reality that he excels at what he does. He is naturally skilled at identifying and predicting problem areas for his clients. “I tell my clients that my job is to do the worrying for them,” he says. He accomplishes this insight through asking a series of related questions that hearken back to the Socratic method, aimed at unearthing true intent and hypothetical pitfalls. “I take a very personal interest in all of my clients’ businesses so that when I’m negotiating for them, I truly take it on so I’m negotiating as if it’s my own issue,” he explains. “To this effect, I will push as hard as I can to get the very best result in whatever we’re trying to do.”

Michael’s method of practicing law is also notable for his remarkable ability to build trust through following up. For example, he methodically contacts his clients with status reports even if there hasn’t been any progress to note just to ensure that they know he’s still thinking of them and that their particular matter hasn’t slipped through the cracks. Managing his workflow in a manner that is as proactive as it is interactive thus allows Michael to build the kind of trust with his clients that enables him to be the best lawyer he can be. “The more trust my clients have in me, the better lawyer I can be for them,” he describes. “It helps them feel comfortable being more open, which allows me to obtain that fifty-thousand foot view where I can see where they are, where they want to go, and how they can get there.”

In advising young entrepreneurs entering the workforce today, Michael echoes the words of his own father, who urged him to find what he loved to do and pursue it because one should not spend thirty to forty years working each day and not enjoying it. “My father speaks from experience,” Michael points out. “He didn’t love his job, and he tells me how he would give up an awful lot of what he has now if he could have enjoyed the road more. So, find what you enjoy,

work harder than everyone around you, and the rewards will come.”

As for Michael, those rewards *have* come, both on the home front and at work. “I have a beautiful, bright, supportive wife who has given me a lot of flexibility to go out and build what I had hoped to build,” he explains. He also has two wonderful children and has worked diligently to manage his time such that he can be an active and supportive husband and father while still accomplishing all he hopes to do professionally. “What’s more, at work, I have a great firm environment with lots of fantastic people and fantastic resources,” he adds. With these tools, he focuses on running his professional endeavor not only as a practice, but more so as a business.

In light of his achievements, many people would call Michael lucky, but he would caution against this terminology. “To some extent, every successful person has a degree of luck on their side, but luck comes from looking for ways and opportunities to become successful,” he says, reminding each person that our destinies lay within our own hands to a large extent. “It comes from finding your own way into a position in which you can really accomplish things.” As his

wife, Sue, would say, it’s a willingness to invest in one’s self. It’s the ability to know your own strength, whether it’s promoting the personality behind your practice or something else altogether. It’s taking the bricks of these strengths, applying courage and perseverance, and building something great.

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt

President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon’s Blog](#).

