

MERGER AND BREAKAWAY EXPERTS CONVENE NEAR PRINCETON AT OLD MERRILL LYNCH LAIR

Originally Published By Elizabeth MacBride, RIABiz

There's a certain strange symbolism in the conference venue for this year's MarketCounsel gathering, which has drawn nearly 100 people to a woody locale near Princeton, N.J.

The Wyndham Princeton Forrestal Conference center was, until about five years ago, Merrill Lynch's training facility.

The elite cross-section of the industry that is gathering here are taking over, for three days, anyway, the rooms and hallways once occupied by wirehouse elite. It's a safe bet, however, that none of the RIAs are coptering in via the helipad that is still outside.

Brian Hamburger gets a chuckle out of that. The founder of Hamburger Law Firm and MarketCounsel, is bringing a generally jovial atmosphere to his second annual gathering.

There are about 30% more people at this year's conference than last year's, he says, though he didn't reach his out-of-the-ballpark goal of 150 attendees. The increase over last year is most likely a reflection of the outside speakers MarketCounsel lined up this time around.

It costs \$1,200 to attend the conference, though companies that pay a retainer for MarketCounsel's legal and compliance services get discounts depending on their level of membership.

It's a safe bet that most of the firms here are seeking to take advantage of the upheaval in the market. There are likely to be RIAs with enough capital to snag a wirehouse team that needs a home, or broker-dealers who are angling to get into the fast-growing RIA-space.

Cementing their relationship

Custodians are here cementing their relationship not only with the closely held investment advisers here, but with Hamburger's firm, whose presence in the legal services market for breakaway brokers has helped push it onto Inc.'s list of the 5,000 fastest-growing companies in the nation.

One of the highlights for tomorrow is expected to be a panel of executives from four roll-up firms, including Focus Financial, HighTower, United Capital and United Atlantic. Their topic: increasing your firm's valuation.

They may be facing a bevy of questions from the audience about the realities of m&a: how much capital is truly available to finance acquisitions?

Dan Seivert of **Echelon Partners** will talk about acquisition strategies, including how RIAs can snag wirehouse broker teams.

Friday's agenda is dominated by regulatory questions on everyone's mind, as Washington continues its push to remake financial services regulation.

Hamburger says his firm doesn't make money on the conference, though it comes close to breaking even.

Sponsors include AdvisorData, Schwab , Pershing, Orion Adviser Services , PKS Investments, RBC Advisor Services and TD Ameritrade.

Along with building relationships with clients and sponsors, Hamburger says he hopes the conference leaves attendees with a sense that the upheaval in the market has given them an opportunity to grow closer to their clients and win new ones.

"This is when they need you – not in the good times," he says. "I've been critical of investment advisers. I don't think they've taken advantage of this time."

One final note: Merrill left this big training center not because it was retrenching. In fact, the wirehouse decamped to a bigger and swankier campus down the road in Hopewell.

Here's one question I will be posing to conference attendees. What is it about this the investment advisor business that generates so many conferences? I've covered plenty of different kinds of business and business communities, but never encountered another in which there were so many conferences. — Elizabeth

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ECHELON Partners (ECHELON) was formed in 2001 to offer investment banking and consulting to a subset of the financial services industry known as "investment product developers and distributors" (IPDADs). Since that time, ECHELON's professionals have helped hundreds of senior executives envision, initiate, and execute a multitude of complex business strategies and transactions. ECHELON's business is making companies more valuable through delivering advice and orchestrating transactions. Accordingly, ECHELON measures its success in the enterprise value it creates for its clients. Companies that strive to outperform their peers choose to work with ECHELON because we are as passionate about their results as they are.

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