

# Executive Q&A with Tom Wolfe: Balancing justice, business savvy



Tom Wolfe is a trial attorney and commercial litigator whose practice is focused on complex business cases including product liability, oil and gas, mass tort and class action defense. Tom is also the president and managing partner at Phillips Murrah.

Published: July 27, 2008

Oklahoma City has several large law firms, and they compete for clients and prestige.

[Tom Wolfe](#), president and general partner of the city's third-largest firm, Phillips Murrah, has been at the helm of the business since 2002.

In those six years, the firm has added more lawyers and other professional staff, and has expanded to fill new downtown office space.

Wolfe, 50, spends most of his time practicing law. And his law practice has been successful. Most noteworthy was his lead position in the firm's handling of all Oklahoma litigation involving the anti-obesity drug fen-phen.

"That was the most intense, but interesting litigation I've ever been involved in," Wolfe said of his 10 years of dealing directly as an attorney defending Wyeth, the pharmaceutical company that manufactured the drug.

Wolfe last week sat down with The Oklahoman for an interview in a conference room down the hall from his office. This is an edited version of that conversation.

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Q: Do you think lawyers make good businessmen?

**A: By reputation, no.**

Q: Has that been your experience?

**A: I don't really have a business background so there's been a learning curve for me and I've certainly made mistakes along the way. My background's actually in journalism. So the business side sometimes is a little bit difficult for me. It's one of those things where I spend a bit more time than some people.**

**Certainly the practice of law has changed so much over the years. When I was a young associate just out of law school, one of the partners came in and said "The practice of law is**

changing. It's no longer a profession; it's a business. Everyone needs to get used to it." I didn't really understand that at the time. Now you see it with some large national firms that really are run like corporate America. There's a bit of a trickle-down effect.

We have the same concerns, the same issues – profitability, balance sheet and all that other businesses do. At the end of the day, we like so many other businesses do need to make a profit.

Q: Do you think the traditional law firm business model is the best model?

A: I think for the most part, change is good. I started practicing in mid-1980s, and firms at that point in Oklahoma were not run as a business model. It was, "do the work and we'll send out the bills at some point and maybe we'll get paid."

A lot of firms failed during that period. I think lawyers have become smarter; they've become better business people. They've had to.

I think today's model is a lot better than yesterday's model. Firms have to survive. Larger firms are able to provide services to clients that smaller firms can't. In Oklahoma City, we're the third-largest firm. Nationwide, you have firms with 3,000 attorneys. We're set up just about the same as those firms because we have different departments that handle different things, and we try to be able to service all our clients' needs. It's just they have more people doing the same thing.

Q: Is there still a role for the independent lawyer who just wants to hang out his shingle?

A: Absolutely. Those lawyers will always exist. Those lawyers tend to – not in every instance – but they tend to deal with

the smaller business transactions. I'll tell you right up front that's not the case across the board because there are a lot of individual attorneys who have their own practices that are extremely successful and they're representing bigger businesses.

Q: Talk about the impact of one of the founding partners leaving the firm?

A: Keith McFall announced (last week) that he was leaving for one of the competitive firms. We're friends with Keith. Keith was here twenty-something years and we'll miss him from a personal level.

But our firm is really no different from any other large firm – no one person, whether it be Keith or me or any other attorney in the firm has such a significant economic impact that it makes much of a bottom-line difference. From a personal standpoint, we'll miss Keith. From an operational standpoint or from an economic standpoint, the impact is minimal.

Q: Do you like television shows and movies about lawyers?

A: Yes. Do you remember "LA Law"? I watched that every week. I also like "Boston Legal." Over the years I've tried to avoid becoming addicted to any of those shows because I can't commit the time to do it. But I do watch "Boston Legal" from time to time. I've always said those shows depict a case comes in in the morning, they have a meeting in the afternoon, they try the case and have a verdict before the end of the day. I wish that's the situation, but it's not.

The only TV show I've allowed myself to become addicted to in the last few years is "Lost." We, my wife and kids, watch that religiously. So I guess I'm kind of a "Lost" nerd – figuratively and literally.

Q: Who are your real-life heroes?

A: I have a lot of people that I admire. My wife is a nephrologist, a kidney doctor. She works really hard. She deals with issues that I don't deal. I have a bad day at work, it's because a deposition didn't go well or something. She has a bad day at work, it's because a patient died or something happened. That's a hard thing to handle and she handles it well.

My father was an attorney and he's kind of the reason I ended up practicing law. I knew all along that I was going to be an attorney.

It really wasn't until I got into law school that I became interested in what I was doing from an educational standpoint.