

IBM IP leader joins board of new Amster venture

By Richard Lloyd

Rowan TELS, the tech enabled legal services provider launched a few years ago by RPX co-founder John Amster, has appointed IBM IP head Bill LaFontaine to its board.

Given that IBM annually receives more US patents than any other company and Rowan is looking to revolutionise a prosecution market that it perceives to be too costly and inefficient, LaFontaine should provide a valuable sounding board to Amster and his team.

The IBM leader is the first IP figure to join Rowan's board, which thus far has largely been made up of early investors in the business.

In an interview Amster said LaFontaine offered invaluable perspective of running the IP operation in a large multinational and added that he hoped the senior IBM'er would be relatively active.

"I think he's a believer in the fact that software is going to have an impact on the preparation and prosecution market," Amster said. "So I think he's interested in observing what we're doing in trying to create that kind of change so not only will he be a sounding board but I think he wants to be part of that change. He wants to help the industry move forward."

Amster launched Rowan after leaving RPX in early 2017 and has focused his new venture on providing a suite of services to in-house IP counsel. That includes an automated, software driven platform to streamline patent prosecution and taking a new approach to tracking and clamping down on counterfeit products.

LaFontaine and his team at IBM are just the kind of client that Rowan wants to be selling into although Amster declined to reveal if Big Blue had signed up. He did claim, however, that his new venture was getting traction in the market.

Having launched RPX in 2008 with fellow co-founders Eran Zur and Geoffrey Barker, Amster has plenty of experience of trying to grow an IP business during a downturn. And Rowan's offering of driving greater efficiencies and bringing lower costs to the prep and pros process might well be appealing at a time of tightening budgets. But it may also be battling against the default position of some rights owners to simply try and screw their prosecution law firm down on fees or get that firm to do more to deliver greater value.

Amster admitted that most corporate IP teams are now under growing budget pressures, but he claimed that historically legal departments and the IP groups within those departments have "generally been more immune to frontline cost-cutting pressure".

From his time at RPX and before that at Intellectual Ventures and elsewhere Amster is closely associated

with the deals and licensing market, and he predicted we would see a bump in such activity the economic picture becomes more uncertain.

"There's always a lag on the transactional side but I do think we're going to see more patents for sale and we're going to see the bid/ask spread on licensing deals get narrowed as companies just want to get things wrapped up," he said.

He also predicted an increase on the litigation front: "I think we're going to see more companies that are crying poor in a way they weren't before." That might make those businesses more likely to fight assertions rather than pay out on large licensing fees.

As well as looking to revolutionise the prep and pros market, Amster also sees an opportunity on the consulting side allowing clients to tap into the combined expertise of the Rowan team and into insights around portfolio value or law firm performance thrown up by the business's software. If that comes with a promise of significant cost cutting then the message might well resonate. But it also means that while Amster has told us that he thinks this business could be bigger than RPX, the ramp up in revenues is likely to be slower and might now be slower still in the current climate.

That might lead the former RPX CEO to ask for patience from his investors and to turn to the likes of LaFontaine for plenty of advice. **iam**



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