

MIDSIZE HOT LIST



A SPECIAL REPORT

Good things, it seems, come in midsize packages. We asked our readers to nominate law firms with between 51 and 150 attorneys and that excel at deal making, litigation, counseling and other legal services. The 20 firms we highlight this week do all that and more—they also have demonstrated creative strategies that keep them competitive against much larger law firms. They build cultures that attract and retain top talent. And they take pains to understand and serve their clients' needs.

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Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell



LAW WEEK COLORADO

CAROLYN FAIRLESS

FIRM FACTS:

- **Year founded:** 1998
- **Headquarters:** Denver
- **Total attorneys:** 100
- **Partners:** 40 ■ **Associates:** 26

In summer 2014, Wheeler Trigg O'Donnell (WTO) managing partner Carolyn Fairless tried back-to-back legal malpractice cases to juries. The panels delivered decisive defense verdicts for two different law firm clients, and she even won attorney fees in one case.

After two months of grueling courtroom work, Fairless was hardly ready to blissfully settle into an office routine. "I was despondent for about a month," she joked about her posttrial mood. "It's so much fun to be in trial."

The enthusiasm is infectious at WTO, named by one business publication as a top workplace in Denver, based on anonymous employee surveys. The firm frequently pairs with Am Law 100 firms to take high-stakes suits to trial. Often, WTO takes the lead; at other times, its partners are sole counsel from the start.

In 2014, the firm secured key rulings and verdicts for clients including Mercedes-Benz USA, Pfizer and Whirlpool, which won a complete defense verdict in the "moldy washer" class action in the Northern District of Ohio. "These are some of the best lawyers that you can get," said Eric Sharon, Whirlpool's chief litigation counsel for North America. "They're not part of a 1,000-lawyer firm where people are coming and going. It's a midsize firm that keeps it that way intentionally and is selective about the type of people they hire."

Centrally located in Denver, where quality of life is high and cost of living is low compared with large legal markets, the firm competes for top talent, successfully luring lateral hires away from jobs on the coasts.

"People have an excitement here," Fairless said. A new lateral hire recently told her she "didn't realize how fun it could be to practice law until she came to WTO." Fairless added, "There's always a buzz here. It's a really exciting place to practice law."

—Ginny LaRoe