

Carlton Fields' CEO On How Firm Has Lasted 125 Years

By **Adrian Cruz**

Law360 (April 3, 2026, 4:43 PM EDT) -- Earlier this year, Florida-based Carlton Fields LLP announced that the firm is celebrating its 125th anniversary, an occasion Gary Sasso, longtime president and chief executive officer, said is especially notable considering all the different historical and industry challenges that have presented themselves during that time.

"It's very exciting, and it's a time for reflection and also heavy lifting," Sasso said. "Frankly, I feel a heavy burden in ensuring that the firm continues to thrive. We're half as old as the country, and we've survived two world wars, two global pandemics, the Great Depression, the Great Recession, cultural and political upheaval, and technological change. So much has gone on, and it's both mind-boggling but also comforting to me that we've risen to the challenge."



Gary Sasso

Carlton Fields was founded in 1901 by Giddings Mabry. He was joined by Doyle Carlton, who later became Florida's governor. While it originally was a regional operation focused primarily on its home state, Carlton Fields has expanded significantly since the turn of the century, opening locations in markets such as Atlanta, New York, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

To commemorate the occasion, Carlton Fields released a YouTube video detailing the firm's history. Sasso said the anniversary was also highlighted at the firm's annual meeting of its attorneys and key staff, and there will be other internal correspondence and events regarding the 125th anniversary throughout the rest of 2026.

Sasso has been with Carlton Fields since 1987, and he's been CEO since 2006. He said that despite their negative nature, the 2008 recession and the COVID-19 pandemic, during which he spearheaded the firm's response, produced some of the highlights of his tenure. He added that he's most proud of the firm's response regarding its employees, refusing to cut staff, salaries or hiring as a number of law firms did during these difficult periods.

"We just leaned into it and did the best we could to navigate it very collegially and very effectively," Sasso said. "So that was a great challenge, but also a highlight in my book. We did just fine, and we've come out of it thriving, so all of those give me a great feeling about our firm."

Sasso spoke with Law360 Pulse about Carlton Fields' long-term growth strategy, the factors behind the

firm's successful performance and its approach to talent recruitment and retention.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

What are some of the challenges in maintaining a law firm operation?

The profession has changed quite a bit over the decades. The economy is in a certain amount of uncertainty and chaos, and we are constantly striving to ensure that our services meet our clients' constantly evolving needs.

Competition is also fierce and there's been a lot of consolidation among law firms. These days, it's national and global. For example, when I first started at Carlton Fields, our services focused on local and regional needs and before the advent of the internet, law firms had provincial or regional monopolies. Now, we can collaborate across the country and the globe, and competition has taken on a different form.

In an era where midsize firms are constantly consolidating, merging with larger practices or outright shutting down, how has Carlton Fields managed to avoid that fate?

It's a choice. We have made a strategic decision not to go in that direction. Firms can give up very easily and believe that giving themselves up to a larger firm or combining is in their best interest. When I started at Carlton Fields, we were much more regional, with just around 100 lawyers, and it was a different world back then.

As the profession started to change and as practices started to transform themselves, I realized that we needed to grow but wasn't sure how to do it. We investigated a number of different strategies, which included at least a dozen times where we looked into merging with a similar-sized firm. We ultimately decided that would have been tough to manage, because even though law firms seem like they're the same from the outside, they can be very different from the inside. We have different cultures, policies and traditions, and it's hard to find a good fit. You have to check a lot of boxes.

We also discussed combinations with larger firms, and we get approached all the time with different growth opportunities. We could have thousands of lawyers by now but we've decided to chart a different path. We decided to stay smaller, under 500 lawyers, and we focus more on qualitative growth and not quantitative growth, targeting major markets to build out a nationwide platform.

We're also very careful with who we add to the firm, choosing to go into major markets because that's where you have the most business opportunities and most depth of talent. That type of platform also allows us to competently provide services across the country, and we work on litigation in virtually every state, and M&A deals, real estate transactions and regulatory work across the country and internationally.

We opted not to get bigger because law firms aren't like other businesses. When you merge and grow, you don't get economies of scale and in fact, you can have the opposite happen. When you have conflicts of interest to navigate, they become more complex to handle the larger you get.

Our business is a relationship business and we want to know, trust and like all of our colleagues. That's something which is difficult to do when you get too big and become bureaucratized. Lawyers like autonomy, and that's something we can provide. We believe we're large enough to handle the most

sophisticated transactions and litigation, but we're not so large as to give up those relationships, which we believe are sacrosanct.

What's been the firm's approach to recruitment and retention in a competitive legal market?

I think we offer a very special value proposition. We offer career paths and are very inclusive in making people shareholders here. There are no arbitrary caps on how many people can be promoted from associate to shareholder, and our structure is very inclusive as well. We pay based on performance, not class structure, so it's a very equitable environment, which is rare these days.

Associates at many firms have no assurance to make partner and in fact they can face very stringent barriers that can prevent that. We also pay very competitively up and down the line if our lawyers are patient and look at this as a career path. While we don't have clients at the very top end of the spectrum with books of business worth hundreds of millions, at our part of the compensation spectrum, we're very competitive.

What we offer new hires is a very accommodating law firm with great collegiality, down-to-earth people and an incredible shot at building out a great career, which is hard to come by these days. When people join our firm, they enjoy being somewhere that's committed to relationships and not trying to grow just for the sake of size.

Diversity, equity and inclusion have been part of Carlton Fields' core values since the beginning. How has the firm worked to ensure that culture continues in a political and societal environment that has been critical of people and institutions who embrace these values?

We've always stayed the course and we were very early movers in this area. Doyle Carlton was fighting for women's suffrage in the 1920s, and we hired the first woman lawyer in Tampa, who was also the first woman in her law school class at the University of Florida. We've also hired one of the first Black and one of the first Jewish partners and became one of the first firms to offer benefits to same-sex couples.

We engaged in these practices not because clients demanded it or because it was popular, but because it was the right thing to do. We've always taken that approach and still do. We've stayed the course and believe it's a sound approach. Our lawyers and staff, along with applicants to our firm, know we're inclusive and we're happy to explain that to anyone.

What are the firm's goals for the next 125 years?

We hope for more of the same. I think one of the advantages of our strategy is that we remain nimble. If we decide at some point along the line that a combination makes sense, we can do that from a position of strength. From time to time, we talk to larger firms where it looks like it could be a good strategic option, but we rarely conclude that's the case.

I suspect 10, 20 and maybe 125 years down the road that we'll continue to embrace our values of collegiality, care for our clients, inclusiveness and professionalism. Those are enduring values from the beginning of time that I believe should endure, and because the legal profession is a different type of field, we really need to focus on relationships. We can't hold on to our attorneys or clients contractually — we're ethically prohibited from doing so — therefore we need to be bonded by those relationships, and that becomes trashed if we get too large.

That said, we're not sitting back complacent about who we are and what we are. I talk about growing clients, talent, profitability and platform all the time. We have to be relentlessly focused on that, but in a qualitative way. Even if we love who we are now, that's just a dot on a map, and a dot on a map is either part of a line going up or a line going down, and we choose to be the line going up. So we're constantly trying to get better. We're always looking for colleagues who can add depth and strength to our firm.

We're always pursuing strategies, looking for high-growth sectors of the economy that can help build the firm and grow the firm in a qualitative, positive way. So I would imagine we'll continue to stay the course on that line of thinking.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.