

# 'Young, Hip, Cool and Fun'

A fledgling law firm is carving a niche by targeting multimedia start-ups South of Market

By TORRI STILL

Nestled in a loft South of Market, the law offices of Britton Silberman & Cervantez evoke the casual comfort of a software company – or, for that matter, a home. A piano sits in the foyer, and a well-stocked kitchen caters to the attorneys' every caffeine-related whim.

Brent Britton, a bleached-blond, leather-jacketed transactional attorney, and Gil Silberman, the soft-spoken, piano-playing intellectual property expert who serves as managing partner, sheepishly apologize for the state of the firm's new "conference room." The cavernous space is bare but for a table and chairs; it will be subdivided into offices as the firm adds attorneys.

## **Britton Silberman & Cervantez**

**Partners:** 3

**Associates:** 4

**Clients:** 200

**Specialty:** Venture funding, corporate licensing and IP work for SoMa start-up companies

With more than 200 clients, seven-attorney Britton Silberman & Cervantez is thriving. The firm has positioned itself as the epicenter of the tight-knight multimedia community that surrounds SoMa's South Park. BSC lawyers work – and play – with some of the country's most successful Web developers.

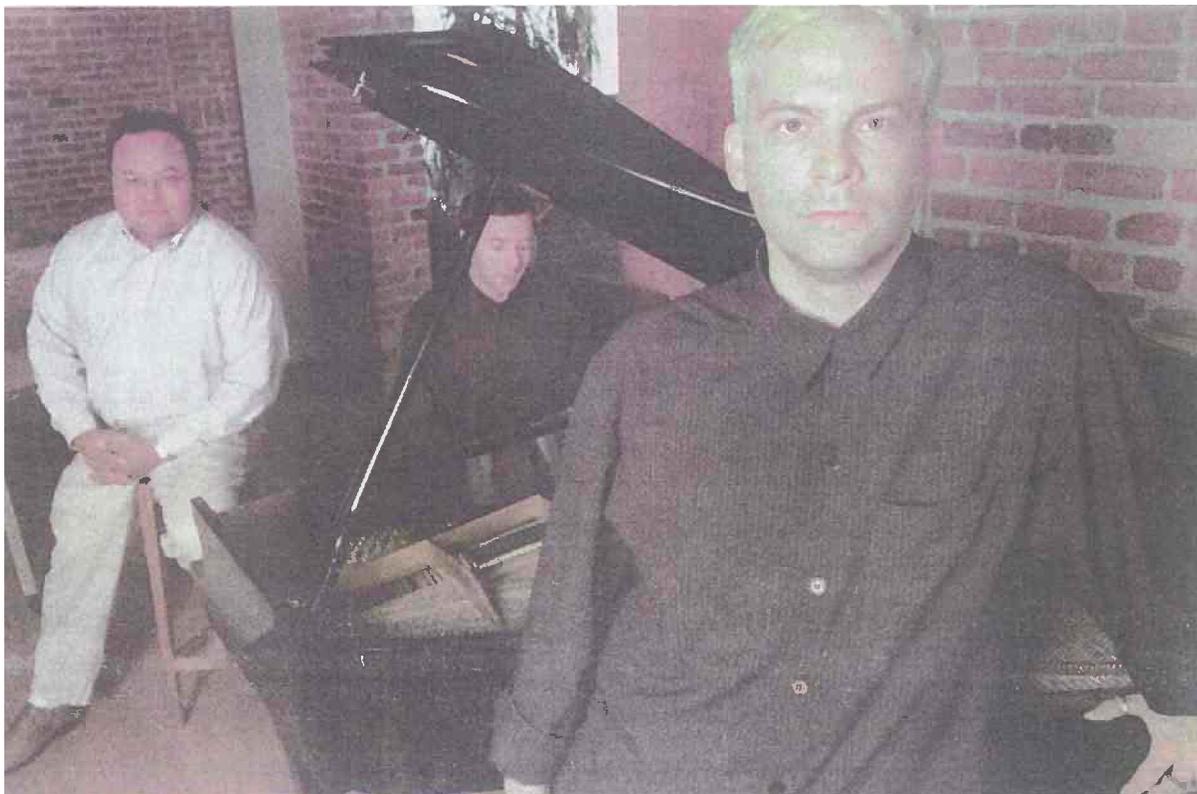
"We can't walk through South Park without running into a client," Britton says. "The lawn there has become our conference room annex."

Their neighbors have BSC, which one client pithily describes as "young, hip, cool and fun," the SoMa high-tech community's choice for venture funding, corporate licensing, and IP work. Their success is due in no small part to the partners' backgrounds: Both Britton and Silberman have engineering degrees, and the third partner, Thomas Cervantez, has worked on the business side of Internet start-ups.

Their collective expertise "saves our clients time and money," Silberman says. "They don't have to spend time training us. We laugh at their jokes and know all the acronyms."

The BSC trio is elated at the number of referrals coming their way, but as they bulk up – the firm is hiring at a clip of one to two attorneys per month to keep up with client demand – they are grappling with the same issues all firms face as they grow.

The partners, who declined to release financial information about the firm, vacillate between worrying that BSC is growing too fast and fearing that it is not growing quickly enough. The atmosphere they have created



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within the loft's exposed-brick walls – the impromptu sing-alongs at the Steinway, the midafternoon breaks for jogs along the Embarcadero, the closeness with their associates and their clients – could be threatened by expansion.

## 'WHY NOT?'

Britton and Silberman met in 1995 at Weil, Gotshal & Manges in Menlo Park, where Britton served a stint as an associate and Silberman as a summer associate. Both are quick to emphasize that starting their own firm was not a reaction to any negative experience there. It was, though, "a classic case of, if you think you can do better, why not start your own firm?" Silberman says. "We saw the opportunity right in front of us and thought, no one else is doing this. The needs of e-commerce, Web design and technology are needs we could serve really well."

The two concede that Silicon Valley is well served by the firms that specialize in representing tech companies, but say that companies in San

See *YOUNG*

## STRIKING A

## CHORD:

Brent Britton (front), Thomas Cervantez (left) and Gil Silberman on the piano are making beautiful music with web companies.

# Young Firm Targets Multimedia Companies

*Continued*

Francisco are often overlooked.

"Anyone who thinks that there's not a large tech community in San Francisco is missing a very large phenomenon," Britton warns. "There are people, many of whom we represent, who are defining the way Web site development works in this world."

Their faith in their clients' potential is such that BSC has adopted a practice made famous by some of its more established Silicon Valley counterparts: investing in clients. "The preferred arrangement is to defer or discount time billing fees in exchange for equity," Silberman says.

He adds that investing in clients, which BSC does "selectively and conservatively," is advantageous for both parties. "For new companies with little cash," Silberman says, "the equity can facilitate a long-term relationship with a top law firm and afford them a scope of services they could not otherwise afford." The firm, in turn, "can improve the quality of service because it reduces pressures to over-economize on much-needed work."

Additionally, Web developers, marketers, PR consultants and Internet service providers often turn to BSC for guidance on investing in their own clients. "They want us to advise them on how they might take stock in their own start-up customers," Silverman says. "Some of the arrangements we see are quite creative: rent for stock, inventory for stock, advertising space for stock, even office furniture for stock."

## 'DEEPLY GEEKY'

Of the firms that serve the Valley or the city, few can claim the technical expertise of BSC. Their "relatively deeply geeky education," as Britton characterizes it, has supplied the BSC attorneys with the vocabulary to communicate with their clients, most of whom are engineers themselves.

"We're among our clients in a way that brings them close to us," Britton adds. "We haven't developed any form of institutional removal from the businesses we represent."

Britton, 33, touts himself as the only practicing attorney who also has graduated from MIT's Media Laboratory. After receiving his J.D. from Boston University School of Law and his Weil, Gotshal stint, he was president and general counsel of Light Entertainment Corp., a Los Angeles-based Web and software design company.

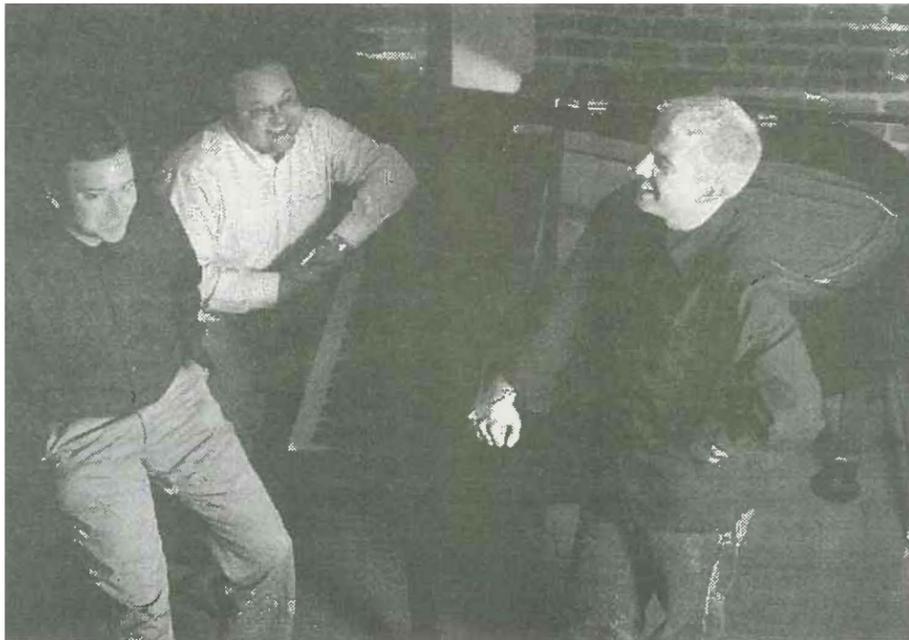
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**'Just with our personal networks, we've got plenty of business coming in. It's amazing how many referrals we're getting.'**

— Partner Thomas Cervantez

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Silberman, 33, graduated with electrical engineering and computer science degrees from Princeton, and spent a decade managing technology companies before enrolling at Boalt Hall School of Law.



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**WHERE THE CLIENTS ARE:** Attorney Brent Britton (right) with partners Gil Silberman (left) and Thomas Cervantez, says: "We can't walk through South Park without running into a client. The lawn there has become our conference room annex."

Tom Cervantez, 34, a former solo practitioner who joined Britton and Silberman nine months after they started the firm in February 1997, is a Harvard M.B.A./J.D. who co-founded the Internet service provider Geonet Communications and Globalnet, an investment banking firm. A corporate specialist, he previously worked as an associate at Pillsbury Madison & Sutro and Cooley Godward.

BSC has landed most of its clients through referrals from satisfied customers – and through pressing the flesh and handing out business cards at the nightly parties endemic to South Park's multimedia community.

"We haven't needed to take out billboards" to publicize the firm, says Cervantez. "The reality is, just with our personal networks, we've got plenty of business coming in. It's amazing how many referrals we're getting."

## BREAKING AWAY

BSC clients practically trip over themselves to praise the young firm and its triumvirate of tech-savvy partners.

Eric Tam, the CEO of the Web design firm Red Eye Digital Media, was Britton and Silberman's charter client in early 1997. "Their approach to their profession breaks away from some of the common stereotypes of the legal profession," he says. "[It's] not your typical law firm," Tam, who has recommended the firm to dozens of people, says his experience with other counsel has made him a stalwart BSC devotee. "[Other attorneys] are clueless," he says. "They don't understand our industry or the issues of intellectual property for this new ball game. They're trying to apply traditional methods to it that just don't fit. They send us contracts that just aren't applicable to what we do."

BSC client Chris Tacy, CEO of the Web design and engineering company Fire Engine Red, says that other firms have inadequately served

his company's needs. "We were being represented by a large firm that shall remain nameless, and we were spending a fair amount of our time explaining our business and how to be lawyers to our business.

"The fact is, [BSC attorneys] understand what this business is like," Tacy continues. "One of my deepest fears is that firms are going to realize how valuable they are and swap them up. That would be a real problem for us."

Britton, Silberman and Cervantez do indeed have grand plans for the future, but Tacy can rest assured that those plans involve the expansion of their own firm.

Five years down the road, Cervantez says, "I definitely see the firm as being bigger than it is now. I see us moving toward establishing offices in other start-up areas. We could have 25, 30, 50 attorneys."

BSC attorneys know that their small firm must be prepared to match what could be exponential growth on the part of their clients. Britton says the firm would welcome a client exploding à la Yahoo or eBay. "It is our intention never to turn down work," he says. "We will grow with our clients as fast as they need us to grow."

Silberman is more cautious about the firm's growth. "Often, in place of putting the brakes on, there's the temptation to grow as fast as you can. We have to keep the same quality standards." In the next breath, however, he rattles off the list of places – Silicon Valley, Los Angeles, New York, Austin, Boston – where BSC hopes to set up shop.

Reminiscing about the not-so-distant days of carrying moving boxes for their then-embryonic clients, Britton and Silberman couldn't help but get a bit nostalgic about what the past two years have brought for their upstart firm.

"It's been a blast, an absolute blast," Britton says. "It hasn't been a long, strange trip, but a short, wild ride. And I hope it gets wilder."