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Lawyers spin electronic web to wrap up clients

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It's a jungle out there. So how does a lawyer find his way and track down clients?

The Internet today for many attorneys is an important and constantly changing way to link up with new business.

And, more and more, it's a popular way for clients to find lawyers.

To get noticed in cyberspace, hundreds of thousands of U.S. lawyers list themselves on popular Internet legal directories.

Some lawyers choose the simplest and least expensive listing in these directories. Some add as many bells and whistles as they can afford.

Other lawyers, a smaller but growing number, sign up with legal referral services on the Internet that promise to send them regular leads on people seeking lawyers.

This story will discuss two examples of each type of service, starting with the latter.

Among the several legal referral services available are LegalMatch, which started in 1999 in San Francisco and now has Chicago clients, and a newer, Chicago-based firm, LegalFish, launched in 2003.

Both LegalMatch and LegalFish say they do background checks on all attorneys whose names will be given to people who seek lawyers, to ensure that all of the lawyers are in good standing.

Both services are free to the people who seek lawyers, while the lawyers pay for membership.

Both operate by asking a member of the public who seeks a lawyer to fill out a form online.

Through the form, the potential clients give their identities, their locations and the nature of the legal problems for which they seek a lawyer. The referral services make it possible for the lawyers to contact the clients in return.

"Thousands" is as specific as LegalMatch gets regarding the number of lawyers who

are on its national network roster.

As for customers seeking lawyers, "In 2005 — over 3 million people came to us for legal help," said Donald E. Keane, vice president for marketing.

Keane and Laurie A. Ziffrin, chief executive officer, said that since 2001, more than 260,000 customers in Illinois have sought a lawyer through LegalMatch.

Currently, more than a thousand Illinois customers a month come to LegalMatch, and the service matches about 70 percent with lawyers who subscribe, LegalMatch asserts.

The majority of the customers at LegalMatch are individuals, but about 10 percent are small businesses, according to the firm.

The minimum fee to a lawyer who wants to receive case leads from LegalMatch is \$2,500 a year. But actual fees are based on the category of law the attorney practices and the attorney's geographic location.

For example, a family law practitioner in Cook County would pay \$7,000 for a one-year membership, a Cook County immigration lawyer \$3,200, and a Cook County intellectual property practitioner \$2,500.

A family law practitioner in Columbus, Ohio, or an immigration law practitioner in Jacksonville, Fla., would pay the minimum \$2,500 annual fee, Keane said.

A personal-injury attorney in Los Angeles or a business transactions attorney in New York City would pay \$25,000, he said.

New lawyers must also pay an extra \$500 registration fee for background checks.

Wes Cowell, head of a Chicago divorce law firm that bears his name, and Denise M. Nalley, a Chicago criminal-defense lawyer, say they regularly get new business leads from LegalMatch.

Cowell said that, when he signed up in 2001, he got 20 to 40 leads a week. Today, he said, he gets "between 75 and 100 leads a week" from throughout in Illinois.

He said he gets an equal number of leads for new divorce clients from his own Web site, www.Illinoisdivorce.com.

Cowell said he is quite pleased with the number of leads he gets from LegalMatch, even though he estimated that only about 10 percent are "good prospects." Many of the leads are people who can't afford a lawyer or have unrealistic demands, he said.

Cowell estimated that he lands as clients "2 to 3 percent of the leads" he gets from LegalMatch.

Cowell said he pays \$1,200 a month for these leads from everywhere in the state.

"It pays for itself," he said, and his firm has grown from two lawyers to six since 2001.

Nalley, the criminal-defense lawyer, prefers not to say how much she pays LegalMatch, but she said the quality of leads she gets is high.

Nalley said she gets 10 to 12 leads a week, half involving traffic cases and half criminal, "from speeding tickets to Class X felonies."

Asked whether the fee is worth it, she said, "Absolutely. By far. Oh, yeah."

"In a way, maybe, it helps you get cases that are better paying," Nalley said. She said one question LegalMatch asks prospective clients is annual income.

"Quite a few cases I've gotten are people whose kids are arrested. They go on there and they put down their income because they want to be responded to by someone who knows they can pay," she said.

She also said prospective clients through LegalMatch often provide enough information that she knows which ones she wants to ignore.

LegalFish, located at 155 N. Michigan Ave., was started by two lawyers, Anish D. Shah and Jude Rajan Soundararajan, plus a sales and marketing specialist, Joshua Fuhrmark, in 2003.

"We Help You Find The Right Lawyers In
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Your Area Fast, Free & Privately," says a typical LegalFish online ad. The company markets itself to the public through search engines.

Their Web site, www.LegalFish.com, asks prospective customers to fill out a form online telling who they are and the problem for which they seek a lawyer.

LegalFish said it now has 270 attorneys nationwide who belong to the service and 15 lawyers in the Chicago area.

The fees quoted by LegalFish are less than those of LegalMatch. They start at \$180 a month (or \$2,160 a year) depending on practice area and go up to \$5,000 a month (\$60,000 a year) for attorneys who seek only "big personal-injury, medical malpractice or complex litigation cases," according to Shah.

The firm says all attorneys can benefit from LegalFish, and that most of the lawyers currently on its rolls practice in the areas of personal-injury, employment, workers' compensation, immigration, criminal law and family law, or handle business transactions.

LegalFish says a special feature is that the service is not entirely automated. "We contact the client ourselves" sometimes to ask questions that the lawyer-members of the service may need answers to in advance, Shah said.

By making personal contact, "we increase the chance the client will decide to retain one of our attorneys," Shah said.

In addition, Shah said, LegalFish accepts as members no more than seven lawyers per practice area in Cook County and in Los Angeles, so those lawyers have greater opportunity to get the appropriate LegalFish leads. In smaller counties, LegalFish accepts only three to five attorneys per practice area.

LegalFish has a variety of pricing programs, and in some, "if the lawyer does not get any clients for that month, we'll waive the fee for that month," Shah added.

The registration fee for new lawyers, which also may include the first month of membership, is \$500 for most practice areas other than personal-injury. For personal-injury lawyers, the registration fee is \$300, but the member must pay a higher monthly fee, Shah said.

Personal-injury lawyer Lawrence P. Maya of Deer & Stone P.C. in Chicago said, "I've had situations where I've had a lead every day for a period of a week, two weeks. I turn down a lot more cases than I accept," especially when cases "don't justify me getting involved."

Maya said he accepts three to five new

cases a month from LegalFish, mostly from Chicago and the surrounding area, "primarily personal injury. I think I've had a couple workman's comp."

"The good thing about the site," Maya continued, "is it gives you access to everything [in the categories that the subscriber signed up for], so you can pick and choose what you want."

Clients he gets through LegalFish, he said, understand litigation better. "That's one of the biggest advantages I've spoken about," he said, "the quality of clients you get from the site."

Maya did not wish to discuss how he pays for the service.

Chicago attorney Walid Joseph Tamari of Tamari & Blumenthal said he subscribes to LegalFish for leads from Cook County on business or commercial litigation and business law cases.

For this story, Tamari would respond only to some written questions, but he said LegalFish provides "several leads in various practice areas ... by e-mail on a monthly basis."

Tamari said he tells other lawyers that "LegalFish could be an effective part of a law firm's marketing portfolio."

In addition to these referral services, people looking online for lawyers can turn to legal directories. Among these are Lawyers.com, operated by LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell, and FindLaw.Com, owned by the Thomson Corp.

Both say they have hundreds of thousands of attorney-subscribers.

The services distinguish themselves from the lawyer referral sites.

"We provide lawyers with tools they can use to market themselves online," said a FindLaw spokesman.

As for Lawyers.com, "What we are doing is providing ... a list for the end user to ultimately make his own decision based on the credentials that we provide," said Joseph J. Douress, vice president and general manager for LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell.

FindLaw asserts that its Web site attracted 350,000 searches for lawyers in Chicago alone in 2005; nationally, the Web site gets 4 million visitors a month.

FindLaw says it has 638,000 lawyers nationwide listed in its directory, including 82,000 in Illinois and 25,000 in the Chicago area.

Although it doesn't actively distribute leads to lawyers, "We help lawyers build and publicize their Web sites and connect them with prospective clients through our online directory and other tools," said Stephen R. Noel, senior director of the

FindLaw Portal.

The Web site lists lawyers in three tiers.

The basic listing, or the bottom tier, is free. It tells only the lawyer's name, address, telephone number and practice area, Noel said.

The top tier is a paid advertisement. The middle tier consists of lawyers who have full a profile in the FindLaw directory as well as a Web site that is linked to FindLaw.

"Generally speaking, for a couple hundred dollars [a month], you should be able to get a profile for yourself in our lawyer directory," Noel said.

Otherwise, he would say only that "[g]enerally our pricing varies based on practice area and location. Prices are more in big cities. A high-priced practice area would be personal injury [or] criminal law."

FindLaw's biggest assistance to lawyers, according to Noel, is helping them build their Web sites and helping the customer and the lawyer find each other.

Des Plaines attorney Jeffrey A. Rabin, a FindLaw subscriber who focuses on Social Security cases, said, "I get some referrals through their online listing. Way more important to me is the Web site they created" for him.

Rabin said he wanted a "top flight Web site" that would attract clients who need help with various types of Social Security law. He also wanted a service that keeps his Web listing on the first page of Internet search engines for his specialties.

Rabin said it is impossible for the average lawyer to do these things without assistance.

He declined to say what he paid FindLaw to design his Web site, but he said, "I'm a small business and able to handle it without a problem. I get clients from around the country on this."

Noel said FindLaw has recently launched a new lawyer matching service, called LegalConnection.com, which offers client leads to lawyers "on the LegalMatch business model." It is separate from the FindLaw lawyer directory.

He said LegalConnection was launched last September and had no statistics yet.

The Lawyers.com web site "had close to 513,000 lawyer searches in Illinois for the year 2005," said spokesman Douress of the parent firm, LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell.

"That averages between 40,000 and 45,000 searches a month" in Illinois, he said.

Cook County alone saw 244,000 searches on Lawyers.com in 2005, and close to

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175,000 of those were in Chicago, he said.

This online legal directory has 400,000 attorney-subscribers, Douress said.

"In Illinois, we have about 2,800 law firms that are customers — of which about 1,300 are in Cook County and, in Chicago, around 1,000."

For the least expensive listing on Lawyers.com, "If a solo practitioner simply wants a listing and no other bells and whistles, it will probably cost him close to \$100 or \$150 a month," according to Douress.

The average listing for a small firm with up to 20 attorneys might cost \$250 to \$300 a month, he continued.

About a quarter of the customers pay no

more than \$150 to \$200 a month, he said.

For a price, lawyers can get a more prominent and detailed listing and can also "buy a Web site from us," Douress said.

"Over 20,000 law firms in the U.S. use Martindale-Hubbell to design and host their Web site," he said.

"We have customers spending under \$1,000 a year and [others] over \$10,000 a year," Douress said.

"Our subscribing firms benefit not only from Lawyers.com. We actually take all of our subscriber information and make it available on Google and Yahoo, MSN.com, 'superpages,' 'Citysearch,' Switchboard.com," Douress continued.

"We try to provide our customers with as broad an audience as possible. We're not exclusive just to Lawyers.com."

A new feature recently added allows someone looking for a lawyer to click on four attorneys or law firms and then compare the lawyers or firms side by side on what they offer, he said.

Lawyers.com is a separate directory of lawyers from the other database maintained by Martindale-Hubbell at Martindale.com. Martindale.com says it has a million lawyers and law firms listed. That database "attracts generally legal professionals looking for other attorneys," according to Douress.