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Finding clients, or rather, having someone find them for you



Attorneys hail online legal matching service as worthy investment

Managing Your Practice

BY SHERYL M. VASSALLO

It's 11 p.m. and you're ready to call it a night, but you can't sleep.

Your mind is racing and you can't stop wondering if tomorrow will be the day you will find your match, that perfect someone who supports you and makes you feel needed.

No, we're not talking about online dating. We're talking about the newest wave of internet advertising--online legal matching services that specialize in finding attorneys for clients and clients for attorneys.

In answering the age-old question of "Where does an attorney go to get more clients?" traditional tactics such as print ads, television and radio commercials, direct mail and good, old fashioned word-of-mouth may only get you so far nowadays. With consumers turning more frequently to the Internet for everything from doctors to diapers, the future for growing one's client-base may quite possibly be found online.

In this practice management article, Lawyers Weekly speaks with two major online legal matching services, as well as attorneys who have used the service, in order to determine just what is to be gained from these online "client brokers."

'Client broker' business booming, attorneys and litigants benefit

Question of ethics

Though there has been much controversy in state bar associations across the country surrounding the ethics of attorney/client legal matching services, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has recently ruled in favor of these online services.

According to a seven-page letter dated May 26, 2006, from the FTC Office of Policy Planning, Bureau of Competition and Bureau of Economics, the committee wrote to the Professional Ethics Committee of the Texas State Bar stating their opinion on the ethics behind Texas attorneys utilizing online legal matching services.

The question at hand was, "Does Rule 7.03--which prohibits lawyers from paying a non-lawyer to solicit clients except for paying normal advertising fees--also prohibit lawyers from participating in online legal matching services?" The opinion of the FTC, supported by three different internal departments, stated it does not prohibit attorneys from employing these services and, in fact, benefits consumers through potentially lowering legal costs and increasing competition among attorneys.

Even though the U.S. Supreme Court's 1977 ruling in *Bates v. State Bar of Arizona* paved the way for attorneys to proactively market themselves, most state bar associations--Michigan included--have not explicitly laid out rules defining the concept of online matching services.

Equally beneficial

According to Laurie Ziffrin, CEO of San Francisco-based LegalMatch, the FTC opinion is significant because it distinguishes attorney/client matching services from prohibited lawyer referral services and cautions ethics committees against prohibiting these types of services.

Ziffrin said the service is a win-win for both clients and attorneys, explaining that more and more consumers are utilizing the Internet to find attorneys.

"Most solo and small firm attorneys struggle to get their names out. It's not uncommon for them to be forced to be generalists, taking the cases and clients that find them, rather than finding the cases they want," Ziffrin explained. "LegalMatch, as a client acquisition tool, frees attorneys from the expensive and time-consuming chore of finding clients while allowing them to be selective about the legal matters they handle. It reduces client intake time to a matter of minutes, providing our member attorneys greater opportunity to increase billable hours and revenue."

From the standpoint of a consumer, Ziffrin said the service streamlines the process of locating a qualified attorney by providing confidentiality, ensuring that attorneys match in terms of experience and expertise and only offering attorneys who are available to accept new clients and are genuinely interested in the consumer's case.

Anna Ostrovsky, general counsel with LegalMatch, said because of continuous increase of internet fluency among consumers, online legal matching services offer attorneys conveniences and benefits that other more traditional advertising methods do not.

"LegalMatch provides attorneys a steady case flow, as they benefit from our extensive and ongoing marketing efforts and take advantage of our focus on the increasing population utilizing the Internet to find legal representation," she noted. "Traditional methods take years to establish and often don't provide consistent traffic."



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— Laurie Ziffrin, CEO of LegalMatch, pictured at right with associate Anna Ostrovsky

Likewise, Anish Shah, founder of a Chicago-based LegalFish, another online matching service, said the benefits to attorneys and clients alike are enormous.

“Many clients do not know where to turn when seeking legal services. Phone books and most online directories provide little useful information about an attorney and most of them do not screen their attorneys,” he declared. “With LegalFish, clients do not waste time calling different lawyers only to find out that they are not interested. They can submit their request and have interested attorneys come to them. This process allows both prospective clients and our member attorneys to engage in informed decision making.”

Shah also noted that LegalFish does background checks on attorneys to ensure that they’re qualified to handle the cases they’re given and they have no troublesome disciplinary history.

Return on investment

According to Bolingbrook, Ill., attorney and LegalMatch member Mazyar M. Hedyat, who had practiced in downtown Chicago with a group of other attorneys for the first two years of his legal career, the service aided him in his decision to run his practice out of his home in the suburbs.

“I’m sitting [at home] with a couple computers and a couple desks and it kind of looks like an office, but where are the clients? I’ve got the work environment I like, but where do I get business? I had always worked with other people but became relatively isolated by comparison,” he explained. “The web was an up-and-coming thing [at the time]. This gave me the opportunity to contact people who may have been next door, for all I knew.”

Hedyat noted he reviewed other options before joining LegalMatch, including postcards, mailers and newspaper advertisements, but, to him, the offline methods didn’t work nearly as well as LegalMatch.

“The first thing I noticed was I got business and, on average, I would say I probably get 10 times the return on my investment,” he said.

Moreover, Chicago attorney and LegalFish member Robert Pantoga, who has been practicing criminal defense for more than 25 years, has seen similar success in the few short months he has utilized the service, though he exercised caution in the beginning.

“I was suspicious about it because trying to market a legal practice is a very difficult thing to do and it’s also very expensive,” he said.

However, he noted the results he saw were immediate and his return on investment has been more than 100 percent.

“If I didn’t get another case all year, I have made money. The leads you get are genuine,” he exclaimed. “I’ve been with Martindale Hubbell, I’ve been with Westlaw, I’ve been with LexisNexis, I’ve been around and this is the first one for a reasonable fee that produces.”

Shah said the cost of utilizing the LegalFish service varies depending on the practice area and the counties in which the lawyer subscribes but, in general, for a non-contingency practice area the cost is \$180 a month with a \$500 application fee that includes the first month of membership. He said that contingency practice areas can range between \$1,600 and \$5,000 per month, and for attorneys who take only very large cases, the costs are significantly higher.

In terms of the “type” of attorney that represents the best fit for the service, Shah said they’re usually the attorneys who are being sought out by individuals or small businesses.

“Most of our current attorneys practice in personal injury, criminal, family, immigration, estate planning, employment, intellectual property and business law,” he said. “An attorney who only handles complex antitrust cases or maritime law would probably not get too much value from a service as ours.”

Ostrovsky, though, said any attorney can be a fit for LegalMatch, though the most successful ones are those who respond quickly to consumer inquiries.

“Attorneys looking to increase client flow, decrease intake time and better focus their practices are the best fit for LegalMatch,” she noted. “We have significant traffic in most areas of law.”

Shah maintains attorneys should recognize and keep in mind that legal matching services act as a means to increase an attorney’s business flow in conjunction with other well-thought out efforts, not solely on their own.

“LegalFish provides a more qualitative process for finding clients. However it does not claim to be able to build an attorney’s practice by itself, nor does it recommend that attorneys only avail themselves of our service,” he concluded. “Rather, it should be a complementary part of an attorney’s overall marketing and client strategy, and is designed for those attorneys who are interested in gaining additional clients during the year.”



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