



THE CANADIAN  
BAR ASSOCIATION

## Connecting with clients

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**Online lawyer referral services are a smart alternative to traditional channels.**

*By Michael Rappaport*

To run a successful practice requires drumming up business and getting your name out there. There's nothing wrong with using traditional channels — signing up to lawyer referral services offered by law societies or placing an ad in the Yellow Pages, for example. But it would be a shame to pass up on opportunities that can be picked up online. After all, the last few years has seen an explosion in the number of online referral services for lawyers looking to connect with clients. Here's a rundown of a few notable ones.

#### **Affordable legal advice: JusticeNet.ca**

Driven by a deep commitment to access to justice, Heidi Mottahedin launched JusticeNet in September 2009, a legal referral service which helps match low- and middle-income clients with a qualified lawyer across Canada. JusticeNet is entirely self-funded and operates on a shoestring budget. Eight law students who volunteer to answer phones and help guide callers to the appropriate lawyer staff the call centre.

To qualify for legal assistance clients must live in Canada, have a net family income under \$59,000, and be in financial difficulty.

JusticeNet offers assistance in a wide range of legal areas, including criminal law, civil litigation, family law, landlord/tenant disputes, disability support, personal injury, bankruptcy, employment law and immigration/refugee law. The website reaches out to immigrant communities with brochures posted in 15 different languages.

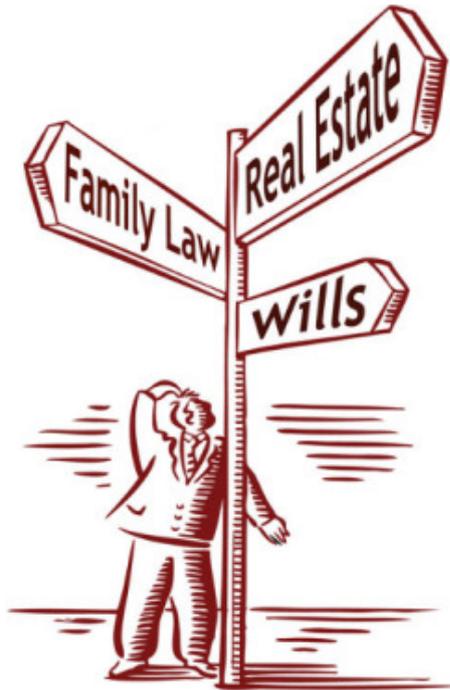
Lawyers pay \$150 plus HST to join JusticeNet and currently it has a roster of 130 members.

To join, lawyers must agree to abide by a reduced-fee schedule for low- and middle-income clients ranging from \$100 or less per hour to a maximum of \$150 per hour depending on the net yearly family income of a client and the number of dependents. Alternatively, senior lawyers or specialists may offer their services at discounted hourly rates, in accordance with JusticeNet's private rate fee schedule, which is between 30 to 50 per cent below normal hourly rates.

#### **Finding the right fit: LawyerLocate.ca**

About 15 years ago Natalie Waddell's marriage was breaking down leading her to call the law society's lawyer referral service. "The lawyer they recommended wasn't a good fit. He wanted to litigate for my husband's future earnings. I wanted an amicable split," Waddell recalls. The experience left her thinking there must be a better way to match clients with lawyers.

So Waddell founded Lawyer Locate Inc. Since launching her website



www.lawyerlocate.ca in 2002, the service has processed more than 83,857 referrals from individuals and businesses around the world to lawyers across Canada.

Potential clients can visit the website, search for a lawyer by practice area and geographic location, read detailed bios of each lawyer and contact them directly or they can call a 1-800 number for assistance in finding a lawyer.

**“We make it easy for both lawyers and clients.”**

“Unlike law societies’ referral services, we don’t require lawyers to give a half-hour free consultation or file a report with the law society after each consultation. We make it easy for both lawyers and clients.”

Lawyer Locate Inc. currently has 579 lawyers as members, who pay from \$62.50 to \$75, every month, depending on their membership plan. The service processes an average of 250 to 300 referrals per week and the website had 1.5 million page views last year. Beyond providing lawyers with a source of referrals, Lawyer Locate actively promotes members through its integration with social media, FaceBook, LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs.

### **PropertyShop.ca**

Lawyers Web Property Shop Ltd, harnesses the power of the Internet, through its portal PropertyShop.ca, to bring a whole new way of buying and selling real estate to Ontario and connect lawyers with clients — without a real estate agent.

Michael Forcier, a real estate lawyer from Owen Sound, founded Lawyers Web Property Shop Ltd., in 2001 with seven partners and launched its website in 2003. “With PropertyShop.ca people can sell their house and get marketing assistance and get legal advice on disclosure issues, warranties, mortgages, and penalties from the beginning to the closing of the sale,” Forcier says.

PropertyShop.ca serves as a virtual real estate agent. Sellers can find an experienced real estate lawyer on PropertyShop.ca and can list their house on the website for \$380 plus HST. Online listings include descriptions of the property and photos. For an additional \$109, plus HST sellers can also list their house on the Multiple Listing Service (MLS), which controls about 90 per cent of the residential real estate market in Canada. Lawyers Web Property Shop ships law signs to sellers with price, ID number and a toll-free number connected to voicemail, which allows sellers to screen calls and set up showings.

Lawyers can login to the portal’s interface and view the vendor’s name, a description of the property, download an Agreement of Purchase and Sale and draft the closing agreement online. Currently, Lawyers Web Property Shop has 72 members across Ontario. The annual membership fee is \$1,000 plus HST.

Instead of charging a flat fee for service, members of Lawyers Web Property Shop charge a commission of between 0.5 to 1.5 per cent of the sale price. In contrast, real estate agents charge at least five per cent commission. “Sellers save thousands of dollars and lawyers make more money too,” Forcier says. “Lawyers get a proper fee and advise clients from the beginning, which is better than being the clean-up crew at the end.”

### **Directories with a difference**

**dynamiclawyers.com** — In November 2008, Michael Carabash, a Toronto business lawyer and entrepreneur founded Dynamic Lawyers, an online lawyer directory with a forum where potential clients can post questions for free that member lawyers may answer. The website also features free videos, news, and a blog and legal forms and e-books for sale. “When this generation goes to find a lawyer the first place they are going to look is online,” Carabash says, adding he nets 100 per cent of his clients on the web.

**LawyerShop.ca**—Stephen Elliott is the chief engagement officer at LawyerShop.ca, an exclusive online network of specialized boutique law firms, which he founded in 2003. “We decided to limit the directory to only one law firm per practice area per region since people were confused by too much choice,” Elliott explains. “We personally vetted the firms in our directory to find the best one with relevant expertise in each region.”

**LawOne.ca** — Doug Jasinski, the president of LawOne Lawyers Network, based in Victoria, B.C., launched the online directory LawOne.ca in January 2006. While not quite as exclusive as LawyerShop.ca, LawOne.ca is restricted to lawyers in B.C. and the number of law firms in each region in the province is capped at three to four. “We wanted to improve the search engine optimization of our members,” Jasinski explains. “Many people’s first stop when searching for a lawyer used to be the Yellow Pages. Now it’s Google.

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