

LEGAL BUSINESS ON MARKETING

Online referral sites offer interactive way to promote practice

By Oliver Bertin
Toronto

It used to be a real headache.

A consumer in Toronto needed a power of attorney lawyer in Calgary, but had no idea where to look. She had no access to telephone directories, trade publications or law lists. She had no friends in Calgary and was scared to call the national firms because of the perceived potential cost.

A few years ago that consumer would have picked the first lawyer she came across, somebody she had never met and knew nothing about. She may have been lucky, or maybe not, but it would have been the luck of the draw.

But it's a headache no longer thanks to the Internet and a bevy of legal referral services that allow any consumer with a computer and an Internet connection to track down a lawyer anywhere in the world, check out her credentials and discuss the case.

The services run the gamut from the simplest consumer referrals to the sophisticated professional sites like Martindale.com and its consumer-side spinoff, Lawyers.com. That service can reach 5,000 lawyers across Canada and into 160 countries around the world.

"Several years ago, we realized that large law firms have a requirement and a need to advertise outside their own countries," said Alan Dingle, vice-president of marketing and communications for LexisNexis Canada Inc., the company that operates those two websites and publishes *The Lawyers Weekly*.

"There is also a demand for Joan and Joe to identify a lawyer to handle a divorce or a real estate deal," he said.

Some of these referral services

are up and running, connecting clients with their lawyers. Others are still in their early stages, working out the bugs.

Take Lawyershop.ca, a small Toronto-based start-up that is still working out of temporary offices on the city's waterfront. Rudy Nelson, president and chief executive officer of Interscope Directories Inc., hopes to expand his referral business into a full-service marketing operation that will build lawyer-client relationships.

"It will be a referral program on steroids," he said. But, he acknowledged, not for a few months.

Natalie Waddell has less grandiose ambitions for Lawyerlocate.ca, a small but respected website that offers a selection of 150 Canadian lawyers in most towns and cities from Quebec to B.C., in all areas of practice.

This website is designed for consumers and small business people who need a lawyer. But it offers a variety of other services, including referrals to financial planners, paralegals, investigators, therapists and her personal website-design business.

"We're a dating service for lawyers," jokes Waddell, a web-designer who operates out of her home in Toronto.

Lawyerlocate.ca is typical of many referral services. Users of Waddell's service who want that elusive lawyer in Calgary simply type www.lawyerlocate.ca into the web browser, scroll down to Alberta, then to Calgary and finally to power of attorney lawyers.

Six names appear on the screen, mainly small to medium-size firms with telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. They can contact the lawyer, chat with her, check the billing rate and decide whether to go ahead.



Natalie Waddell says her portal, Lawyerlocate.ca, is a "dating service for lawyers." Photo by Paul Lawrence

Waddell also offers a referral service. Clients provide their name, address and a short summary of the matter. Waddell passes the information around her stable of lawyers and lets them decide whether to meet the client.

"It's up to the lawyer to contact them," Waddell said. "We don't require a follow-up."

Waddell's service has proven popular among small and medium-size law firms, who typically pay \$750 a year for a listing. Like most other referral services, Lawyerlocate.ca is free for the client. It is also confidential.

Warren Tobias has been a fan of Lawyerlocate.ca since he signed on in 2002. "I think highly of this service," the Toronto barrister said. "It's an excellent service. It doesn't generate a lot of volume but for revenue, it is a very significant and very valuable resource."

John Anderson of Dawe Law Office in Calgary also approves. "I've been quite happy with Lawyerlocate," he said. It tends to

attract a lot of people who are merely shopping for a lawyer, but "it has proven itself over time."

"It does pay for itself," agreed Richard Guthrie of Guthrie Law Firm, also in Calgary. "We do get the tire-kickers, but the people who do write me seem to have real problems."

Lawyers.com is a different kind of service. Operated by the Martindale-Hubbell division of LexisNexis Inc., it is part of the biggest legal referral service in the world with thousands of lawyers on tap in 160 countries.

Lawyers.com is an offshoot of Martindale.com, a well-established website that is tied to the Martindale-Hubbell range of legal services including legal directories, legal articles and even peer-review ratings in addition to the worldwide lawyer-locator service primarily for U.S. lawyers.

The Martindale.com website is used by national law firms. A search of Canadian lawyers turned up firms such as Baker &

McKenzie, Borden Ladner Gervais LLP, McCarthy Tétrault LLP, McMillan Binch LLP and Gowing Lafleur Henderson LLP.

The company saw an opportunity to broaden the website to make it more suitable for Canadian consumers and for small businesses. Martindale.ca was the product for lawyers and Lawyers.com for their potential clients.

It is still early days, but LexisNexis is slowly rolling the new website out across Canada. Over the past six months, the company has identified the cities and types of practice that are most suitable for a website of this sort and is slowly building up to a critical mass of lawyers.

"We have identified an opportunity and we are working towards it," said Dingle. "Lawyers.com is directed toward the small lawyer market. Small businesses and consumers can use it to find a lawyer in Ajax or Burlington."

But the bigger firms will likely stay with Martindale.com and the wealth of professional resources that it offers.

"Martindale's directory and website are highly regarded in the U.S. market," said Ronald Currie, Gowlings' director of marketing. "If you're not there, you don't count."

He added that web referral sites are geared toward individuals, rather than Gowlings' target business market. The sites have, however, brought in clients for Gowlings' intellectual property practice.

Suzie Chin, deputy, business development for BLG, said the websites are important for the firm and its clients. "We definitely see value in these services," she said. "The client wants to find out what is best for them [and] the website is good for that."