

Finding a Lawyer in the 21st Century: A Vision For An Ethics-Focused, Bar-Based Alternative To Commercialized Online Sites

Assumptions

- The Internet will be the primary method for the public to find legal services.
- Search engine optimization, credibility, and user convenience will determine which sites prevail.
- The way in which information is presented on the SEO-dominant sites will be the main force in shaping the public's perception of the legal profession in the 21st century.
- As sites fight for dominance, those that have familiar, popular user-convenience tools that have become the norm on commercial shopping sites will have an advantage over those that don't.
- Some popular customer shopping tools are ill-suited to choosing legal services. Client feedback, endorsements, and ratings in the context of legal services can be a threat to the quality of legal services and thus must continue to be managed, and managed more effectively, through regulatory mechanisms.
- Current state and local bar-based find-a-lawyer Internet services (directories and lawyer referral services) will not be able to compete with national services due to an SEO disadvantage.
- State bars have unrealized, non-monetized value to contribute to the find-a-lawyer Internet marketplace, and that value is exponentially increased if state bars work together on a single national directory.
- Unless state bars and regulators aggregate their databases, expertise, and knowledge behind a single lawyer-locator service and collectively manage the evolution of that service consistent with professional ethics the public will come to identify and choose lawyers the same way they locate and choose hotels and restaurants, to the detriment of the public and the profession.

Elements of a Competitive, Bar-Based Lawyer-Locator

- National directory is built through the membership database of participating state bars
- Evolution of the directory is guided by a consortium of the participating state bars
- Basic directory profile is available free to every member of a participating state bar
- Each lawyer is responsible for his/her own profile content and is subject to the ethical requirements of the lawyer's licensing jurisdiction(s)
- Popular Internet customer tools (client reviews and ratings) are re-designed by the consortium to make them better fit the context of the legal profession, e.g.:
 - Lawyer chooses option of reviews/no reviews, cannot control content if accepts reviews
 - Service confirms that review comes from actual client before posting
 - No single number rating
 - If lawyer chooses review, site encourages feedback on important lawyer qualities, to help educate public expectation about lawyer quality (e.g. reliable, responsive, good listener)
 - Lawyer to lawyer component focused on specialty and niche practice areas
 - No competing attorney advertising on profile pages
- Participating state bars can customize the service.

Economics of a National Bar-Based Lawyer-Locator

- Revenue source for service provider: premium services (e.g. assistance in profile development) to lawyers and/or a service charge to the participating state bar for the cost of offering the free member profile
- Revenue for bar associations: % of premium services purchased by lawyers within the state
- Additional revenue stream as incentive for bar associations that are early adopters

The State Bar of Michigan has partnered with a start-up company committed to this vision, and together with the Ohio State Bar invites other forward-looking state bars to join us in building this new vehicle to serve the public, consistent with the time-honored values of our profession.