

The Alternative

A former arbitration association director creates a consulting niche for parties seeking appropriate neutrals.

BY KENDRA MEINERT-HODSON

Only in Los Angeles could Angela S. Haskins describe her company, ADR International Inc., as the "central casting agency" of alternative dispute resolution. Through ADR International's three divisions, Haskins works with attorneys and neutrals to assess the specific needs of parties seeking alternatives to litigation and to connect them with neutrals possessing the legal expertise and complementary personality traits that will best facilitate a resolution.

Through ADR Expert, Haskins provides research and recommendations to attorneys to assist in evaluating and selecting the best neutral for their particular case. This process can be initiated when an attorney either requests a sampling of neutrals with specialized expertise, or seeks background information on one or more suggested neutrals.

Once a neutral is selected, another division, ADR Outsource, can provide all administrative services for the proceeding.

When Linda M. Lawson, a partner and insurance bad faith litigator at Los Angeles' Meserve, Mumper & Hughes LLP recently mediated a matter, Haskins supervised the parties' follow-up, which ultimately resulted in the settlement of the case. Lawson described the experience as a positive one: "Despite the fact that the matter did not resolve on the day of the mediation, as a result of a 'mediator's proposal' and Ms. Haskins' perseverance, the matter was resolved without incurring additional mediator's fees."

Finally, ADR Image is the marketing arm of ADR International, offering public relations and advertising services that the neutrals don't have time for or simply don't want to do themselves. In working with retired judges and distinguished attorneys, Haskins has learned that, although they are the best in their professions, many of those individuals need assistance targeting their clientele, formulating a business plan and prioritizing promotional activities. As a full-service ADR firm, ADR International's goal is to streamline the ADR process so that neutrals can attend to resolving disputes, and attorneys can have as much confidence as possible in their choices of neutrals.

With ADR Expert, Haskins researches neutrals' professional experience, conducts interviews with neutrals and the attorneys who have worked with them, and when necessary, investigates neutrals' avocations such as fluency in a foreign language or familiarity with a particular culture. She described one of the more unusual requests she received in connection with a dispute involving a professional football franchise, where the parties required a neutral who, in addition to possessing the requisite substantive knowledge, was not a football fan. She says that by contacting the neutrals directly, something that the attorneys could not do themselves, she was able to locate a retired judge who fit the bill.

Haskins prides herself on the ability to differentiate a neutral's strengths and weaknesses: "Sometimes your best discovery referee, someone with attention to detail who can follow protracted litigation, is not your best mediator for settling your dispute on the eve of trial."

ADR Outsource has no exclusive relationships with neutrals, and therefore, ADR Expert is free to recommend the best person for any particular position. With ADR Expert, "all we have to offer is our integrity," Haskins explains.

She understands that repeat business depends on cultivating trust. No uniform certification process exists to guide attorneys to qualified neutrals, and she wants ADR Expert to be an unbiased guide. She describes the process of matching neutrals with the appropriate cases in Hollywood terms: "When you're hosting a 'go-see,' you call all the casting agencies and ask for talent that fits your needs. We send you the people that meet your unique criteria. But with us, you only have to call one agency, because we have connections to everyone in the industry."

In 1991, Haskins arrived in Los Angeles from Lisbon, Ohio and "stumbled" into alternative dispute resolution because she wanted a job during law school, and the American Arbitration Association (AAA) was geographically convenient and flexible. Haskins obtained a bachelor of science degree in business administration and marketing from Ohio State University in 1991. Although she says she dreamed of becoming a lawyer ever since she knew what one was, she had not settled on a practice area.

Once at AAA, she realized that "it provided me with an excellent opportunity to interact with attorneys with impressive credentials and with jurists who were actually making the law and affecting the direction of society."



Angela S. Haskins

Alternative dispute resolution group: ADR International Inc.

Type of cases: various

Law School: Southwestern University School of Law, 1996

Career Highlights: American Arbitration Association, 1991-1996; Women Lawyer's Association of Los Angeles, Board of Governors, 1997-present

Haskins spent her time at the AAA discussing case law, with and asking questions of, any judges or attorneys who would talk with her. She remembers being called on in class to brief a California Supreme Court case that she had discussed with the authoring justice.

"The experience," recalls Haskins, "led me to appreciate the value of alternative dispute resolution, both for the legal community, and my own career path." Her reluctance to focus on a single practice area, stemming from what she terms a keen interest in "anything" crystallized into the practice area of ADR.

Before graduating from law school, Haskins became AAA's director of mediation in 1994, the first non-attorney to do so. She then became director of marketing and outreach in November, 1995, recruiting specialized neutrals and designing and implementing marketing campaigns.

The fruition of Haskins development came when she joined forces with John Horn in 1996 and became the co-owner of ADR International, Inc. Horn and Haskins began as consultants to other ADR providers, but were determined also to capitalize on the direct demand for their expertise. She explains that while the big ADR providers are still useful in assisting neutrals in building practices, "I think a lot of people are coming off the bench... more savvy and they're going independent... because they know how."

With the burgeoning number of independent neutrals, and attorneys who were uncomfortable accepting assigned neutrals, Horn and Haskins quickly adapted their business to this niche market. With Horn providing "big-picture" advice to neutrals on public relations, and Haskins contributing administrative and promotional support, they emerged as one of a few small ADR servicing firms that offer services similar to the bigger companies, at a smaller cost, with more personalized attention, and fewer procedural restrictions.

The company also provides unusual services, such as lecturing and teaching MCLE classes, formulating an ADR training program in conjunction with Loyola Law School, and acting as the administrative body for the San Fernando Bar Association's mediation program.

For now, Haskins is satisfied with her career path. She has found an outlet that affords her "the best of all worlds," culling the fascinating legal analysis from the drudgery of day-to-day litigation, allowing her to run her own company, and to utilize her marketing and promotional skills. Haskins describes ADR International's mission succinctly: "We don't want to be all things to all people. We want to be all things to a few people."