



From the Chair...

by Sheldon Warren

Chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service

Regular readers of *Dialogue* will recall having seen an excellent article in the last edition by Gregg Frame about the benefits of Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS) panel membership to attorneys who are “newly-disenfranchised”, i.e. unemployed, as a result of one of the worst markets in the legal profession since the Great Depression. Gregg, a panel member of the Maine LRIS as well as a LRIS Standing Committee member, detailed how joining a local or statewide LRIS can be one of the smartest investments an attorney struggling to build (or re-build) a practice can make.

I think a strong case can be made that the same holds true when the equation is looked at from the standpoint of an LRIS. I believe that the current difficult environment in the profession presents incredible opportunities for an LRIS willing to reach out and make a comparable investment in these “newly-disenfranchised” attorneys.

Not a day goes by that I don't receive an e-mail from one organization or another offering a program designed to help attorneys deal with the financial and emotional trauma of having been laid off from a firm that just a few years ago seemed to offer unquestionable job security. Many of these programs are directed at attorneys who have been let go by large or mid-size firms. A disproportionate number of

these attorneys are relatively new to the practice of law. Most of these attorneys never had to develop their own clientele, as there was always more than enough work being fed to them by the senior partners.

Further, many of them have never had to really “practice” law, as their jobs consisted of reviewing mountains of documents or writing briefs in cases about which they had limited knowledge.

Quite frankly, these folks need help, and I believe a smart, entrepreneurial LRIS is uniquely situated to provide a significant portion of that help. By providing substantive assistance to attorneys facing one of the greatest crises of their careers, I believe an LRIS will not only enlist a cadre of grateful (and loyal) panel members, but also develop a network of potential referral sources second to none.

I believe these attorneys will also provide the foundation for expanded political support for the LRIS within the sponsoring bar association for years to come, as they are not going to forget who was there to help them when things were tough. Further, many of these attorneys are likely to have experience in areas that their local LRIS may have few, if any, panel members.

The current economic climate also presents serious challenges to small firm and solo practitioners who have seen their small business clients go bankrupt and their account receivables go from a net 30 to a 120-plus status. While these individuals may have different skill sets, and a vastly different frame of reference insofar as developing paying clients is concerned, they provide the same incredible opportunity for an LRIS to broaden its reach within its local service area.

So, what exactly is this “help” that an LRIS can provide this ever expanding group of

“attorneys in transition?” First and foremost, an LRIS can offer what is most needed by any attorney struggling to pay the bills—fee-paying clients. However, I think the role of an LRIS should, nay *must*, be much broader if it is going to maximize the opportunity presented by the current economic slowdown. It's like the old adage, “give a man a fish, you have fed him for a day; teach a man to fish, you have fed him for a lifetime.” An LRIS must essentially teach these transitioning attorneys how to practice in an environment that many are calling the “new normal” if it is to engender the grateful loyalty described above.

An entrepreneurial LRIS should be offering its own “transition” workshops, either in conjunction with programs run by its sponsoring bar association or on its own, on topics an LRIS should know well, e.g. client intake, on-going client relations, marketing, operating efficiently on a fixed budget, etc. Depending on the topics, these workshops could be led by LRIS staff (who knows more about effective client intake than an LRIS telephone counselor?) or volunteer panel attorneys.

That same LRIS should be offering short (one to two hours), intensive workshops in particular subject matter areas, again led by panel members, that would allow an attendee to gain at least a basic understanding of a potential new practice area and, potentially, identify a mentor that might be willing to aid him or her in developing a practice in that particular area. One might reasonably question whether a panel attorney would be willing to help train other attorneys to essentially compete against them for business. My experience is that most panel attorneys are incredibly generous with their time when

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it comes to the LRIS and are, if asked, more than willing to assist the LRIS in any way they can.

An LRIS should have a *prominent* page on its web site (and possibly even a telephone “hot line”) that could serve as a clearinghouse of information and resources for transitioning attorneys. Are there other entities out there that offer—or

at least claim to offer—similar clearinghouses of transition information? Sure there are. But how many of them also actually have the unique ability to provide the user with that much sought after paying client? I would suggest that only a legitimate LRIS that is in the “business of public service” fits that description.

I know there are many other things that can and already are being done by lawyer referral and information services

throughout the country to assist not just transitioning attorneys but also, in a very real sense, themselves, by “making lemonade from the lemon” of a sour economy. These ideas, as well as other topics focused on helping LRISs not just survive but thrive in the ever-changing marketplace of legal services providers, will be the focus of the 2009 ABA LRIS Workshop, which will be held in Baltimore from October 28 through 31. I hope to see you there.
