

DIALOGUE

Fall 2009
VOL. 13, NO. 4

News and Perspectives from the ABA Division for Legal Services

Home

LRIS Feature

LRIS

Promoting LRIS in a Recession: Five Tips to Boost the Bottom Line

Promoting
LRIS in a
Recession

By Charles J. Klitsch

From the Chair

Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS) programs have not been spared the effects of the current recession. Advertising budgets have stagnated or declined. A growing percentage of clients are unable to pay standard legal fees. Panel attorneys take longer to pay percentage fees due.

Pennsylvania's
Notice to
Defend

Recent issues of Dialogue have featured articles aimed at helping LRIS programs thrive in these difficult times. Here are five more tips for stretching your advertising resources and reaching new audiences.

Delivery

1. Take a second look at your local newspapers.

IOLTA

Many lawyer referral services have avoided placing ads in local newspapers. The standard wisdom has been that newspaper advertising is affordable to Macy's or Dillard's, but prohibitively expensive for LRIS programs with small budgets.

LAMP

Pro Bono

That situation is changing. Newspaper publishers have reported a sharp decline in advertising revenue since the recession began. Readership is also down, although most newspapers retain respectable circulation figures. Many publishers, desperate for new advertisers, are willing to make deals. Now is a great time to contact a local newspaper and see if you can work out an advertising contract that falls within your program's budget.

SCLAID

*Download this
issue in PDF*

*Download this article
in PDF*

In a few years, this recommendation may seem quaint, as media experts predict that general circulation newspapers may disappear entirely from some markets within the next decade. For now, however, newspapers present a reasonably priced means of reaching potential clients.

2. Consider alternatives to the yellow pages.

Does anyone rely on the yellow pages anymore? Some publishers have recently announced that residential delivery of the print yellow pages

directory will become optional in the near future.

Quite simply, consumers are no longer willing to rely on a book that may have gone to press eight or ten months ago for reliable information on finding the right lawyer. It is time to take the advertising funds you spend on a print yellow pages ad and redirect your spending to the Internet.

Much has been written in Dialogue about pay-per-click advertising on search engines such as Google and Yahoo and I encourage you to search the archives for recent articles on the topic.

Online display advertising has generated little attention to date. That may change. Cook County, Illinois has begun to sell display ads on the Clerk of the Circuit Court's webpage to Chicago area law firms – a reminder that new opportunities for LRIS online display ads are emerging.

3. Partner with local universities to expand your client base.

Many large universities have legal assistance programs for their students. Occasionally, however, these programs are unable to provide a client with legal representation when there is a conflict of interest or when the legal problem is beyond the scope of the services offered. With budget cuts, some university legal assistance programs are no longer able to provide needed services.

A lawyer referral service is ideally suited to meet the legal representation needs of students unable to obtain help through their university's legal assistance program. In Texas, the Austin Lawyer Referral Service (ALRS) has partnered with the University of Texas to provide referrals when the school's Legal Services for Students is unable to represent a student. Under the agreement, the initial consultation fee is waived when a student is referred by Legal Services for Students to ALRS. Jeannie Rollo, Executive Director of ALRS, reports that over 150 students have taken advantage of this arrangement since the program was launched in June, 2008.

4. Partner with local politicians to provide constituent services and information.

In this recession, constituents have inundated the offices of mayors, members of city councils, ward leaders and state legislators with requests for assistance in matters such as mortgage foreclosures, debtor issues, employment problems and evictions.

Be sure that all your local politicians and their staff members are aware of your lawyer referral service. Offer to meet with elected officials to review the wide range of practice fields covered by your referral panels and the quality standards that make LRIS tower above the crowd.

In Maryland, the Bar Association of Baltimore City has partnered with city officials to spread the word about LRIS to constituents. For example, City Council President Stephanie Rawlings Blake regularly includes a paragraph about LRIS in her newsletter to voters.

In Bloomington, Minnesota, the city government's website includes the Hennepin County Bar Association's LRIS on its "Where to Call for Assistance" page.

In Wisconsin, the "Frequently Asked Questions" page of the Milwaukee County government website lists the Milwaukee Bar Association's LRIS as the place to call when a person needs representation.

This free publicity for LRIS came about because LRIS directors took the step of making local officials aware of the services their programs provide.

5. Refocus your advertising message.

After reading this article, take some time to review your advertising medium, whether it be print, online or radio. Ask yourself whether the message is current.

In a recession, consumers tend to focus on value and quality. Your message should reflect that consumer desire. Emphasize the quality standards you require for panel attorneys. Note that the discounted initial consultation is an outstanding value for obtaining legal advice.

Also, if your marketing campaigns mention specific areas of practice, make sure they reflect consumer demand in a recession.

It is easy to adopt a bunker mentality when economic uncertainty stalls the growth of your LRIS. But fretting will not move your program forward, action will. Take advantage of the opportunities in a recession to reach new clients, and you will find that many of them will return to your service when times are better.

Charles J. Klitsch is director of public and legal services of the Philadelphia Bar Association

Dialogue is published by the ABA Division for Legal Services

Copyright © 2009 American Bar Association

ABA Privacy Statement | ABA Copyright Statement | ABA Reprint Permission