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The New LRIS Competition: Online Directories

By *Britt Wegner*

As times and technology change, it's only natural that Lawyer Referral and Information Services change as well. Ten years ago, an LRIS's biggest competitors were in the Yellow Pages, and everyone spent large amounts of money to have the largest ads. Fast forward to the present and now LRISs are competing for the top Google spot on page one of the search results. And, who are LRISs competing against? Not only lawyers — as they did in the Yellow Pages — but also Online Lawyer Referral directories.

When I recently typed "Lawyers in Milwaukee, WI" into Google, the first three paid advertising spots were three Milwaukee area law firms. One can surmise that they are spending a lot of money to have this placement. Attorneys are now investing as much in online advertising and keyword placement as they do for Yellow Page ads and television commercials. Lawyers have come to realize that if you are going to be competitive in this already saturated market you have to spend a significant amount of money to appear in the places where people look for help. While LRISs may be envious of lawyers' marketing budgets, it is at least a small comfort to know that most often they are reputable local law firms which are advertising. As Director of their local LRIS, if I make these law firms aware of our services I may reap some of the benefit of their spending by encouraging them to send business they are unable to service to their local LRIS.

However, reputable local law firms are not the only ones which come up in the search results. Now there are online directories: Findlaw, Lawyers.com, LegalMatch, etc. These directories vary in design, ability, and user-friendliness, but they all basically provide the same service: Once the potential client types in an area of law and a location/zip code s/he is presented with a list of lawyers in the field of practice specified. Lawyers pay to be on the list that is generated. It's fast, easy and the potential client receives a list of prospective attorneys to choose from.

So how does an LRIS compete with online directories?

There are a few different options. Milwaukee Bar Association (MBA) LRIS Committee Chair Ann Jacobs suggests a few things:

- Don't panic. Just because there is a new online directory or several competing online referral services does not automatically make LRISs obsolete.
- Watch them closely. When a new for-profit online referral service popped up in Milwaukee, it seemed untouchable. It appeared to have unlimited funds to advertise on television, radio and internet. Upon checking out their site, however, it turned out that the company claimed that *their attorneys* were in "ABA Compliance." The ABA was contacted and the company was immediately forced to take that claim off of their website. It is also worthwhile to check each company out and make sure they are in compliance with your state's regulations as a whole. Some providers are skirting the edges of ethics without crossing them, but still appear to be walking a very fine line.
- Ask what the online directories are doing that might make them

appear to be more attractive to the potential client, or how an LRIS can differentiate itself to make the potential client come to it instead. A large concern of mine was that many of these online directories were providing "lists" of attorneys that matched the area of law and location that had been put into the search field. Many LRISs (the MBA included) only provide one name per potential client. The MBA LRIS has often received complaints about this policy since the general public likes to have choices and wants to be presented with options — so that they feel that they made their own educated choice in retaining legal services. The MBA LRIS still wants to be as fair as possible to every panel attorney, so we continue to only provide one name at a time. However, I can easily understand how this could make the MBA LRIS less attractive to some potential clients.

If LRISs are not willing to change their rules and provide more referrals per potential client, then they will have to find other ways to compete with these fast and easy directories that provide lists of attorneys, and sometimes even answers to legal questions.

The MBA LRIS created a blog where the public could submit legal questions at no cost. The questions are sent to MBA panelist attorneys to see if anyone could offer a basic answer, and the answer is posted to the blog. And, if no one posts questions, panel attorneys post basic questions and answers that they may have often encountered.

The Human Touch

The MBA LRIS's ABA Approval, A+ Better Business Bureau rating, affiliation with the Milwaukee Bar Association and the 154 years the MBA has been in existence all make a difference, but even more so is the "human touch." In the online realm, it's going to be our quality factors that distinguish us. An automatic, free online referral (even if only one name is provided) does seem helpful, since some directories do charge for a name or answer. However, there are other stand-out high-quality, high-touch factors: the personal instant chat option and the telephone conversation with a real, live, trained person especially if the potential client is not comfortable discussing his/her specific situation online or prefers more privacy.

No matter how tech savvy someone is, s/he still wants to know that the attorney or information provided comes from a reputable source and many still want that human-to-human contact that many online directories do not offer. As a point of differentiation and competitive edge, LRIS's high level of customer service becomes as important as the money spent on a quality website. LRISs can learn from many other businesses — insurance and credit card companies, for example which constantly repeat the message that there is a live person there for the client when s/he needs help.

Some online directories try to stand out by offering users other services, such as reviews of attorneys and appointment scheduling. While LRISs do not offer any sort of "review" or "rating" of attorneys, each LRIS should tell potential clients about its attorney vetting process and requirements: panel eligibility screening and experience requirements; mandatory insurance; absence of current disciplinary actions; agreement to arbitrate fee disputes, etc. Although no LRIS wants to highlight the possibility that an attorney may overcharge, it can be considered as part of a broader message — the LRIS is there for the client from start to finish.

Another online directory focuses on sole practitioners and targets potential clients that want to set their own rate for legal services. This reverse auction model is an interesting outgrowth of consumer-driven downward pressure on attorney hourly rates, and even the concept of the billable hour itself. LRIS's programs, however, such as Modest Means panels, unbundled legal services referrals, etc., may be just as effective, and would likely provide better vetting of its attorneys.

The reality is bar-sponsored LRISs cannot compete financially with any type of private company that has substantial advertising funds. This will likely cause LRISs to be shoved to the 10th page of a Google search, making it even more difficult to sustain the vital public services LRISs provide. One possible suggestion would be to raise panel member dues and specifically



allocate every dime collected to specific marketing campaigns, e.g., ad word marketing, public service announcements, etc. This could be a relatively easy sell to panel members as an aggregated advertising buy on their behalf.

When the online directories are neck-and-neck, however, it's all going to come down to differentiating LRISs by providing the best customer service possible. As I like to say: "Whatever it takes!"

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