

# Legal Connections: Finding A Good Match

By Cynthia Golomb

Most of us seek the counsel of an attorney while undertaking a significant transaction or experiencing a major life crisis. When facing such challenges, we all look for the best possible attorney to assist us. The one we select has an important influence on the decisions we make and the course of action we pursue. What approach can be used to locate the legal professional best suited to advise us?

As a general matter, in finding an appropriate professional, it is useful to consult with family, friends or acquaintances who may have faced similar legal issues. A recommendation from a trusted and respected person can be enormously helpful, although such a recommendation cannot be a substitute for your own judgment. Some-

times, however, a desire for privacy prevents any discussion of a legal matter with a friend, and a personal referral is not possible.

In such instances, there are many public sources of information that may help in locating an appropriate attorney. Legal directories with listings of an attorney's areas of concentration are available in the public library. Useful information can be obtained by looking at local telephone books and reviewing legal advertisements. The Howard County Bar Association, like many local bar associations, operates a referral service that is accessed by telephoning the Bar Association directly.

Upon identifying the names of attorneys who are possible choices, the next step is to call one of them. Obviously, the attorney might not be available at the time you call, so be prepared to leave a message with a return telephone number. As a general matter, unless the legal issue involves an extreme emergency, it is reasonable to expect your call to be returned within 48 hours by the attorney directly and not by his or her support staff.

When speaking to the attorney, it is helpful to have a small checklist of basic questions and a pad and pencil available to take some notes. Some of the questions that might be addressed in a telephone conversation relate to the specific area of law in which the attorney practices, whether the attorney has handled matters similar to yours in the past, and the fee arrangements between the client and the attorney. Before the initial phone contact, it is also useful to have thought through a basic summary of the situation being dealt with to allow the

attorney to understand better what is involved. In this way, the attorney can focus on the essence of the problem, because it is not reasonable to expect that this phone call should last more than approximately 15 minutes.

The next step is meeting in the attorney's office. In nearly all instances, it is essential to meet with the attorney personally before deciding to hire him or her. Nothing can take the place of a personal interview. At this initial meeting, it is reasonable to expect a more thorough investigation into the facts of the case and an overview of the applicable law than would be possible during the first phone contact. While it is unlikely that a complete solution to the legal problem presented to the attorney will emerge from the initial meeting, major legal issues should be identified.

During the meeting, several important factors should be considered. For example, does the attorney appear to be organized in his or her presentation? Does the attorney communicate clearly about the substance of the law and about the procedures involved in the case at hand? Does the attorney suggest alternative ideas for solving the problem besides simply filing a lawsuit? Does the attorney squarely address difficulties presented by the case or act simply as a "cheerleader" for the client's point of view? Does the attorney suggest specific actions that the client can do in order to be helpful in dealing with the client's problem? Does the attorney appear to care genuinely about the client and the case? Does the attorney appear to exhibit old-fashioned common sense and integrity? By answering

these questions, the client will undoubtedly be able to make an informed decision about whether or not the particular attorney is a good prospect to hire to perform additional legal services.

After the initial meeting, if it is agreed that the client is interested in engaging the attorney to perform other legal services, additional communication should take place. A client should expect the attorney to draft a letter of engagement that outlines the terms and conditions of working with the attorney. A careful review of this document is critical to understanding the basis of the client's and the attorney's obligations and responsibilities toward each other. Reviewing this document also permits the client to evaluate the attorney's skills in written presentations. If the client has any questions about this letter, he or she should call the attorney and have the questions answered before hiring the attorney.

No one can predict with absolute certainty how a legal matter will resolve or how a client's relationship with his or her attorney will work out. However, a careful and reasoned effort to locate the appropriate attorney for the matter at hand will likely yield better results than a haphazard or frantic inquiry. In the long run, the energy applied to this undertaking is well spent.

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