

# BUILD YOUR CLIENT BASE UTILIZING THE STATE BAR'S LAWYER REFERRAL & INFORMATION SERVICE

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Like many practitioners, when I first contemplated signing up for the State Bar of Nevada's Lawyer Referral & Information Service (LRIS), the experience was similar to the trepidation of online dating. Having just formed my own firm, I was in

the market to meet and develop new clients without having to mortgage the firm to pay for advertising and client development. The time it would take to foster client leads and meet with every prospective client meant that having a screening process in place would be essential.

Finally, with the economic ebbs and flows to which a small practice is subjected, finding a stable and constant stream of clients and revenue was essential. Ultimately signing up with LRIS has been the most effective advertising for a small practice I have encountered. In this changing and tenuous economic environment, LRIS offers a low-cost opportunity for Nevada lawyers to stabilize and expand their respective client bases.

LRIS is a low-cost service operated by the State Bar of Nevada, which serves to meet the legal needs of Nevadans who may not know where to turn for legal help or even whether or not they need an attorney. Last year, LRIS received over 28,000 calls and inquiries, which equates to 28,000 prospective clients in need of information or service. LRIS eradicates the need for initial client screening by counsel and staff and saves them from having to determine the nature of a prospective client matter and from having to determine whether or not such an area of law comports with a lawyer's practice. Because the referrals are limited to the areas that participating attorneys have registered for and requested, law firms can focus their practice's development in exclusively those areas which are of interest to the firm. And as a benefit to the clients, the service ensures that they are referred and directed to lawyers who practice in the specific area of the law to meet their needs.

Like referrals from clients or other practitioners, there is no question that a large number of the referrals granted through LRIS do not involve complex legal matters or even long-term clients but, instead, reflect the need of citizens to receive immediate information regarding and answers to simple basic legal questions. An active and thriving legal community exists, based not merely upon the ease with which it allows all of its citizens to equally and fairly participate in the legal process, but also by protecting the legal process by ensuring that citizens do not drain personal and legal resources out of lack of education rather than their case's merit. Sometimes the best legal advice for the client is that the client does not need an attorney or does not have a case. However, the ability to meet with a stable and steady flow of clients provides not only a great networking opportunity, but also a stable income from consultations.

Prior to my participation in LRIS, I was skeptical of the type and quality of cases it would generate, and, admittedly, snobbish regarding the type of client who would rely upon information provided by a telephone hotline, Internet submission or advertisement. Nonetheless, in slightly over four years in the program, my firm has been engaged over 120 times by clients in a variety of legal matters. Of the referrals which retained this firm, at least 10 of those have led to further legal work and repeated engagements. For comparison, LRIS includes approximately 250 attorneys registered for the service, which means that an average LRIS attorney may receive in excess of 100 referrals in a year. When you consider that it costs \$50 per year to participate in LRIS, the opportunity cost averages around \$0.50 per referral.

The clients vary, and include individuals in need of legal assistance, corporate clients who do not have corporate counsel and out-of-state attorneys in need of local counsel. Matters have varied from expeditious review of transactional documents to multi-party complex litigation in state and federal courts. While long-term legal relationships are always preferred, even those clients for whom the referral resulted in only a single consultation are beneficial. We have been able to build a relationship with those consultation clients, so that when another matter arose which required legal work, I was in a position to be the first name called or first name those clients gave as referrals to other

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individuals. Likewise, because an LRIS referral carries the obligation of providing just one 30-minute consultation, an attorney is never led to feel obligated or required to keep a client once he or she has provided that consultation.

Approximately 10 percent of the LRIS referrals which have resulted in the retention of a client have risen out of referrals not to clients but to out-of-state counsel who have relied on the LRIS to locate reliable local counsel for a particular matter. Like clients, attorneys rely upon the acumen of local counsel recommended by the state bar. This fact became patently clear to me when I needed co-counsel in another state and discovered that the jurisdiction did not have a lawyer referral service I could quickly contact. Instead I was left to dig up and compare multiple attorney profiles, contact the various firms and interview prospective counsel through e-mail and cold calling for interest. A process which took hours over a number of days could and would have been resolved by a referral which could have been

completed in mere minutes through the LRIS – meaning that LRIS does not merely provide a benefit to its member attorneys but is of value to the persons receiving the referral. Obviously the networking opportunities for attorneys are limitless.

While the LRIS does not certify attorneys for expertise or specialization, there is a degree of trust which clients reveal when making contact for their initial consultation through LRIS. It would be impossible to count the number of times that prospective clients have contacted my firm and have indicated that “The state bar has recommended you,” or indicated their pride at having access to counsel which comes with the LRIS stamp. An informal survey of clients arising out of LRIS referrals will reveal that clients have a greater trust in a referral affiliated with the State Bar of Nevada than from most other sources, which a client may view as having not been as thoroughly vetted.

Furthermore, clients in three areas of the law [criminal, bankruptcy and family law] are referred to members who are on experience panels, which means that referrals are provided to practitioners who are not merely registered, but who have a demonstrated familiarity and experience in those areas of the law.

With attorney advertising becoming seemingly more ubiquitous in our society, sometimes the issue facing clients is not an inability to locate an attorney in the selected field, but an inability to discern which attorney, amongst the clamor and din, is best situated to meet a client's needs. Through media, clients are often left with names and telephone numbers but not necessarily with knowledge and confidence regarding which attorney to select or the best way to reach and retain counsel. With an LRIS referral comes a level of client trust and confidence which is not present in a cold call from a prospective client who has seen an ad in the Yellow Pages. Furthermore, counsel can have trust and confidence that the matter has been reviewed by an LRIS staff member and is being directed with an eye toward the attorney's area of

interest. In short, an LRIS referral creates a more educated and confident client in whom the attorney, in return, can have more confidence.

There is an additional benefit in the form of public service and access to justice, which the LRIS fulfills. The Nevada Supreme Court has emphasized, through its Access to Justice Commission and publications, that the general public needs more information regarding the legal system and legal process in general, in order for all persons to be able to participate in the system on a level field. By breaking down the barriers to information and advice regarding the legal system, and by making it easier for all participants in the legal system to be able to obtain the assistance of counsel, LRIS serves an important role in protecting and facilitating access to the courts and legal resources for all citizens. LRIS offers low-cost services for income-eligible participants and, thus, fills a gap between traditional legal service providers and standard client engagements. Finally LRIS provides additional legal funding for many Nevada service providers and organizations involved in fostering the access to justice for Nevada citizens. In 2009, LRIS approved grant requests from its income of over \$120,000 for projects improving access to the legal system by persons of limited financial means, promoting better access to legal information and improving perceptions of the justice system and operation of the courts – resources which ultimately did not require tax monies or dues from attorneys.

With the demands by unrepresented and pro se litigants in Nevada increasing, and economic fluctuations leading many attorneys to seek a stable, vibrant source of clients, vigorous and broad-based participation by Nevada lawyers will be vital to ensuring that Nevada citizens are provided with the information necessary to make prudent legal choices. In this way, LRIS participation and referrals are not merely healthy for attorneys and for the legal community but for the community at large. ■



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