

Getting more for your legal dollar

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About the author



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Marc L. Charney is a partner at Nordman Cormany Hair & Compton LLP, practicing in the area of real property, land use and development, public agency and environmental law. He represents agricultural, commercial, residential and industrial landowners, developers and public agencies, as well as negotiating and documenting a wide range of transactions. Charney is especially active in the area of land use and environmental law regarding the development and subdivision of real property and represents clients before local, regional and state planning and permitting agencies. A member of the VCEDA board of directors, he is a three-time recipient of the Carl Lowthorp Golden Eagle award for outstanding public service from VCEDA.

People seeking legal services also want to be sure that they get those services at a reasonable cost, especially in this economy. Most lawyers charge on the basis of time spent for the client. Knowing that, there are some things that sophisticated consumers of legal services can do to help their lawyers provide services more efficiently.

A person who is prepared to consult his or her lawyer will – usually – get results more quickly and for less cost. The less time the lawyer has to spend discovering information, the lower the bill for legal services will be.

Here are some tips for preparing to consult with your lawyer:

Initial Meeting

It is always a good idea for the client to ask when he initially contacts the lawyer whether the lawyer will agree to an introductory meeting without charge to the client. Many, maybe most, lawyers are willing to do this. From the lawyer's standpoint, meeting for a half hour to an hour is an opportunity to evaluate the case and the client and to determine whether the lawyer can accept the matter. From the client's standpoint, it is an opportunity to make sure that there will be no legal conflicts with the lawyer's other clients, that the lawyer has the experience and knowledge the client is seeking, and to get an estimate of the cost of services requested.

The client should be realistic. The lawyer is not likely to give a legal opinion or resolve the client's issue at a first meeting. Since a lawyer's time and advice is his stock and trade, except for the simplest of problems, all that can be expected to result from the first meeting is an understanding of whether the lawyer will handle the matter, on what basis the lawyer will charge

for handling the matter and roughly what will be involved in resolving the matter.

Organize Your Information

Usually, before a person consults a lawyer he or she has spent some time on the issue requiring legal services. Depending on the nature of the issue, there may be employment records and files, correspondence, contracts, title reports or title insurance policies, meeting notes, accounting records, diagrams, plans, maps or other written materials that are pertinent. By organizing these materials in a logical sequence and making sure that all of the pertinent information is presented to the lawyer, the client will avoid having to pay the lawyer or his staff to find and organize the client's information. Preparing a brief narrative or timeline of the issue is also a good way to present the problem to the lawyer more efficiently. The names and identification of all of the parties related to the matter are critical pieces of information for the lawyer.

Know Your Goal

When advising a client about legal matters, it is usually the lawyer's duty to consider all issues and all

consequences. By knowing what he or she wants to accomplish, a client can narrow the scope of the work that the lawyer has to do. If the client's goal is not legally possible to achieve or is not likely to be achieved, the lawyer can advise the client of that fact without having to research other possible outcomes in which the client is not interested.

If the goal is attainable, the lawyer can focus his or her efforts on achieving it. The result is usually a more efficient delivery of services. Of course, the client can always ask the lawyer to look at other possible goals, based on the lawyer's advice regarding the original goal.

Conclusion

The client is advised to use the initial consultation with the lawyer to both inform and become informed about whether, how and at what cost legal services can be performed, take time to organize relevant information for presentation to the lawyer and let the lawyer know what he or she wants to accomplish. When the client prepares to consult with the lawyer, he or she is – usually – rewarded with more focused services at a lower fee and with a more satisfactory result.



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