



UNDERSTANDING
**THE LEGAL
CONSUMER**
REPORT | 2023



 martindale · avvo

*How prospective clients find, evaluate,
and ultimately hire an attorney.*

Martindale-Avvo's Understanding the Legal Consumer (2023)

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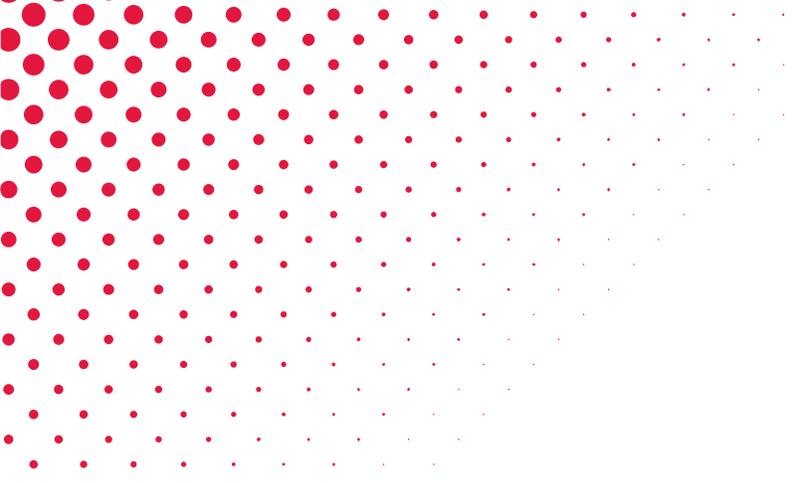
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Executive Summary

Our annual Understanding the Legal Consumer report concentrates on consumer behavior during the search to hire an attorney. Throughout this white paper, we've captured a thorough picture of the legal landscape to help attorneys better understand potential client needs and expectations. These findings are critical to inform a law firm's strategic decisions, improve communication and service offerings, and enhance potential client intake and satisfaction.

Main takeaways:

- **One of the most visible reasons for legal consumers to not hire an attorney: "[they] did not respond."** Since last year's report, this statistic has doubled: "...50% of people say they made a hiring decision within a week, and 80% of consumers will contact another attorney if they don't hear back in 48 hours.
- **KEY INSIGHT:** Sense of urgency is important, but from a consumers' perspective, it's more nuanced. If an attorney seems too busy to respond, the impression is that they may not have enough time to successfully take on the prospect's case.
- **Online reviews define your firm.** Reviews are a cornerstone for building trust and credibility, and contribute significantly to an attorney's online visibility and reputation. Beyond client acquisition, reviews also offer valuable feedback for improvement, enabling attorneys to enhance their services and demonstrate a commitment to client satisfaction.
- **KEY INSIGHT:** Reviews are crucial; they boost client intake, help your online reputation, and contribute to SEO. Invest in customer satisfaction and positive reviews will follow. Also, a tip -- while five star reviews are great, online searchers are a little wary of a perfect score. We recommend that you do the best you can, and don't worry if your rating isn't a perfect five.



Executive Summary (cont.)



- **Recognize the value of an online presence.** While nearly all legal consumers read third party ratings and reviews, a whopping 86% of respondents use online resources when handling their legal matter, and 70% dive into online content before deciding to engage with an attorney. This means an attorney's online presence and engagement with consumers online is of utmost importance in attracting and signing new clients.
- **KEY INSIGHT:** Providing thoughtful, engaging content on your website and legal directories (such as the [Avvo Q&A section](#), for example) expands your reach and has a positive impact on those looking to hire an attorney. Coupled with the Martindale-Avvo [Value of Influence](#), our network delivers content about your firm at the consumer's point of consideration, including top Google search results.
- **Since the pandemic, consumer behavior has leaned into digital solutions more than ever before.** Consumers now report that they initially use email (by a slight margin over phone calls), while website forms, live chat, and online scheduling are also popular. From there, the majority will then want to meet in-person (~80%) before committing to a hire.
- **KEY INSIGHT:** A perfect storm of generational shifts and post-COVID preference for online interaction has influenced consumer contact methods. More people rely on the internet, so when consumers reach out to businesses, the predominant method is increasingly online. Some consumers still prioritize phone calls and in-person meetings, so it's important to be flexible – and meet potential clients wherever they are.

This report shows the consumer's point of view in 2023, offering insights and guidance for attorneys and firms looking to grow their practice.

[Read on for our analysis.](#)



A Closer Look at the Legal Consumer



Let's Get Digital

Consumers overwhelmingly rely on digital resources (86%), including search engines. They also acknowledge the pivotal role of online reviews (50.6%) and responsiveness (61.5%) when selecting legal representation.



Upon analyzing the data from our survey, a theme emerges: the evolving dynamics of legal consumer decision-making in the digital age. This transformation has been growing since the pandemic, but now 86% of consumers prefer online resources, with a significant reliance on them for legal information, reviews, and guidance. Online content, search engines, and digital reviews play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and decisions.

And while online content remains the primary resource for consumers when handling legal matters, we'd be remiss to not mention that this also includes legal directories. Our online legal platforms, notably Avvo, Lawyers.com, Martindale, and Nolo, are instrumental in providing consumers with diverse legal resources and information. Consumer trust in these platforms is influenced by factors such as reviews, accessibility, and the ability to address specific legal questions.

Even though this do-it-yourself research is available and widely used, consumers still don't necessarily rely on the internet to actually solve their problem. When faced with legal matters, consumers lean towards seeking professional guidance; 73.1% express their intent to consult with an attorney, underlining the role legal experts play in navigating the legal system. Interestingly, 35.5% of potential clients plan to engage with an attorney without doing preliminary research, emphasizing a further reliance on the expertise of legal professionals.

[Read more: Unlocking the Value of Influence](#)



What Not To Do

84.8% of consumers planning to talk to a lawyer consider their legal matter urgent, emphasizing the need for prompt assistance.



Even though consumers set out to hire an attorney, hiring rates experienced a decline this year, dropping from 52.8% in 2022 to 33.7% in 2023. And while there has been an uptick in individuals opting for self-representation (12.5%) and exploring online tools (10.2%), these numbers aren't in the majority.

Despite this, there are avoidable deterrents attorneys should take note of: cost is a significant deterrent (46.6%), closely followed by concerns about slow response times (46.2%) and negative online reviews (37.5%).

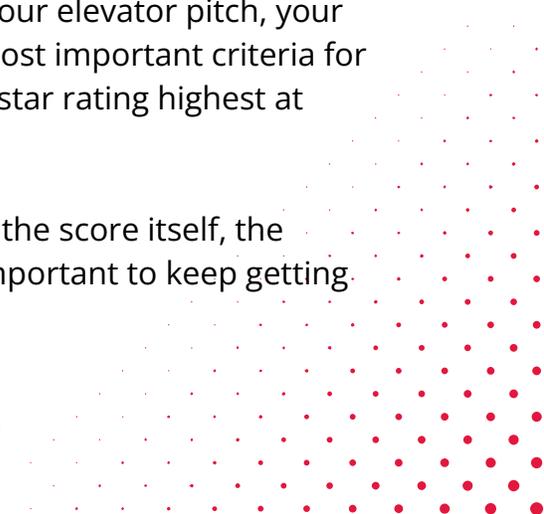


Economic uncertainty has been prevalent in the news cycle over the past year, so we expected to see "cost" as the number one reason to not hire a lawyer. Pricing solutions are hard to tackle, but many attorneys navigate this challenge by providing free consultations or offering a sliding scale for consumers who may not have the financial means to pay a hefty fee for representation.

Almost as importantly, **a sense of urgency** permeates the legal landscape, with a majority of consumers deeming their matters as "extremely" or "somewhat" urgent. Two-thirds of consumers report that their legal problem was resolved within six months. Tools such as live chat, online scheduling portals, or answering services are worthwhile in these cases, as they prove their value in client intake, where time is a critical factor.

Reviews are absolutely essential. Your **online reputation** is your elevator pitch, your first impression. Consumers consider online reviews as the most important criteria for an attorney's reputation and weigh the average review score/star rating highest at 54.1%, followed closely by the number of reviews (53.7%).

And while the number of reviews was almost as important as the score itself, the recency of those reviews is not far behind at 40.1% -- so it's important to keep getting reviews.



As a crucial element in building a strong digital footprint, reviews influence potential clients and foster trust in your legal services. They contribute to the overall success and growth of a legal practice in today's digital age. And if your score isn't perfect? That's okay. We discovered that many prospective clients are a little suspicious of a 100% five-star rating. So, do the best you can.

[Read more: Turning Legal Clients into Advocates & Referrals](#)

The Road Ahead: Strategic Considerations

Nearly half of consumers (46.9%) we surveyed are currently dealing with a legal issue, while 10.6% expect to face one in the next 6 months.



As we navigate legal consumer behavior, this report serves as a compass, guiding legal professionals toward informed decision-making about how they market their services and gain clients. The trends uncovered pave the way for strategic considerations, ensuring the legal landscape meets the evolving needs and expectations of consumers.

We're impressed by the transformative impact of technology on legal consumer behavior. The digital era has empowered consumers with access to information, fostering a shift towards self-empowerment and alternative legal service models. These changes force traditional legal service providers to evolve and to consider the importance of online presence, responsiveness, and meeting the immediate needs of consumers.

As legal consumers navigate the digital landscape with increased expectations for efficiency, transparency, and accessibility, the legal industry must embrace innovation, streamline services, and cultivate a digital presence that resonates with consumer preferences.

[Read The Business of Your Legal Practice Report](#)



About Our Survey

Martindale-Avvo's research department conducted this survey with ~1850 consumers who had previously used one of our legal network sites: Avvo, Lawyers.com, Nolo, and Martindale. Our mission was to refresh our existing data about what potential clients find most important when hiring an attorney, zeroing in on digital trends and communication style.

Our study consisted of many different demographics, but the majority were suburban-dwelling (43.8%) women (57.1%), aged 35-44 (26.4%). While areas of practice varied with little margin of difference, the top five areas that consumers hired attorneys were: landlord-tenant (13.9%), family planning/child custody (13.9%), criminal defense (excluding DUI; 9.6%), real estate (9.6%) and personal injury (9.5%).



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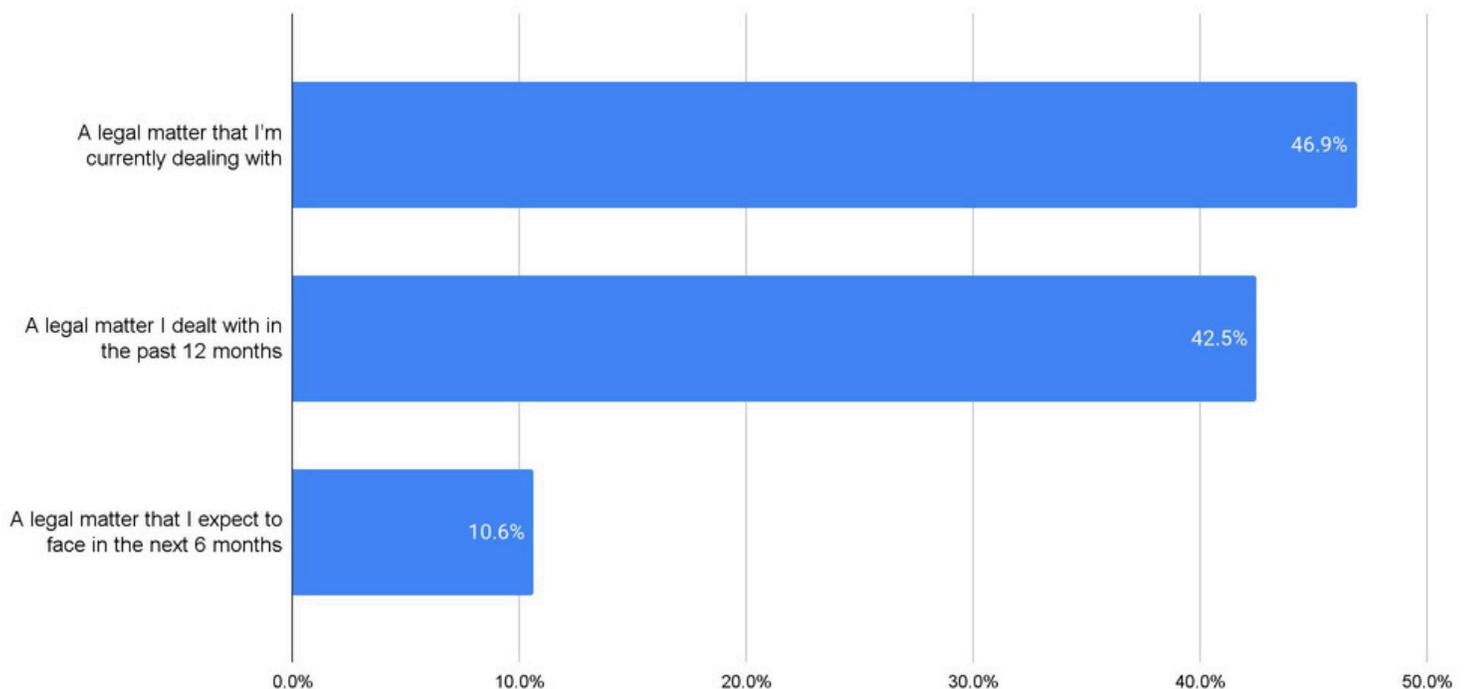




APPENDIX

Nearly half of consumers are currently dealing with a legal issue

What best describes your most recent legal issue?

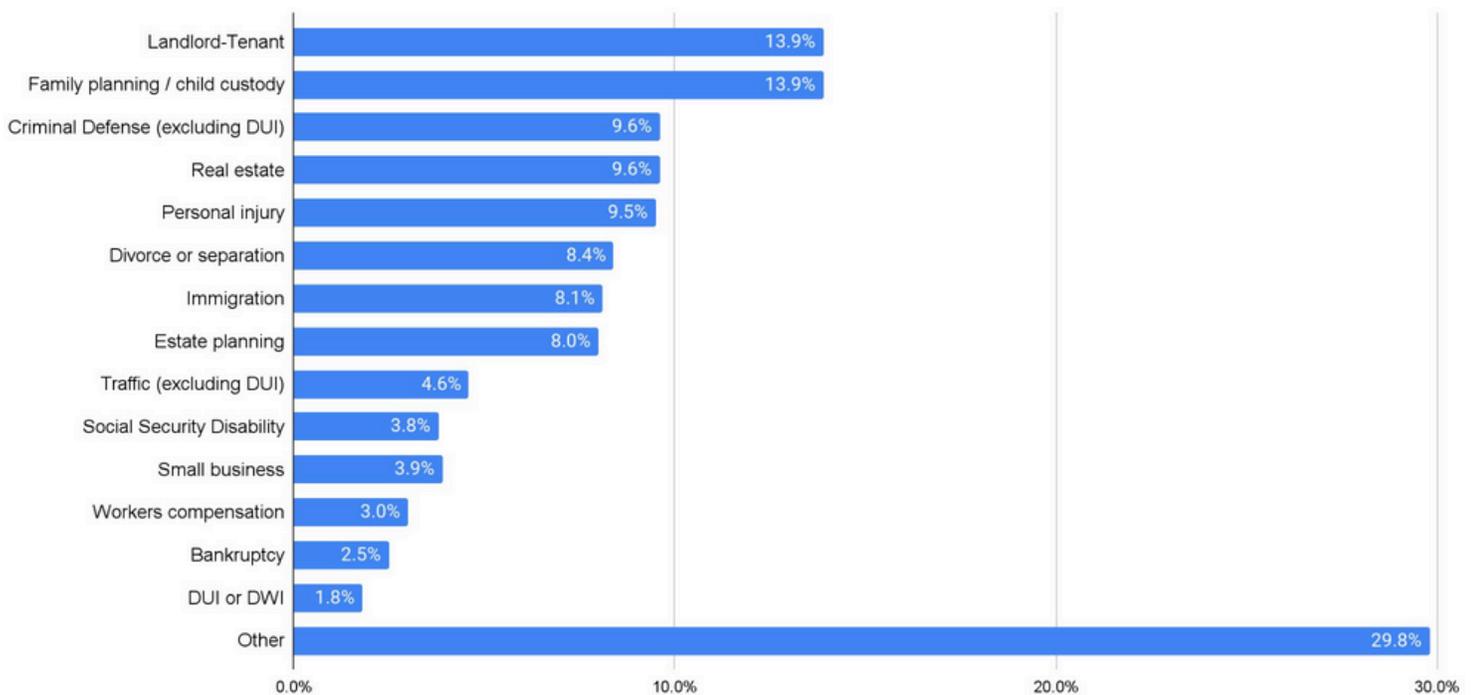


This year, we asked consumers if they expected to face a legal need in the near future, not just if they were currently dealing with one or had dealt with one within the last year.

While most consumers said they faced a legal issue that was a concern for them right now (46.9%), 1 in 10 expected to have to deal with a legal matter within the next six months (10.6%). Another 42.5% of consumers reported that their most recent legal matter was one that they had resolved within the last year.

Consumers face a variety of legal issues, but landlord-tenant & family are most common

What legal issues have you faced most recently? (select all that apply)



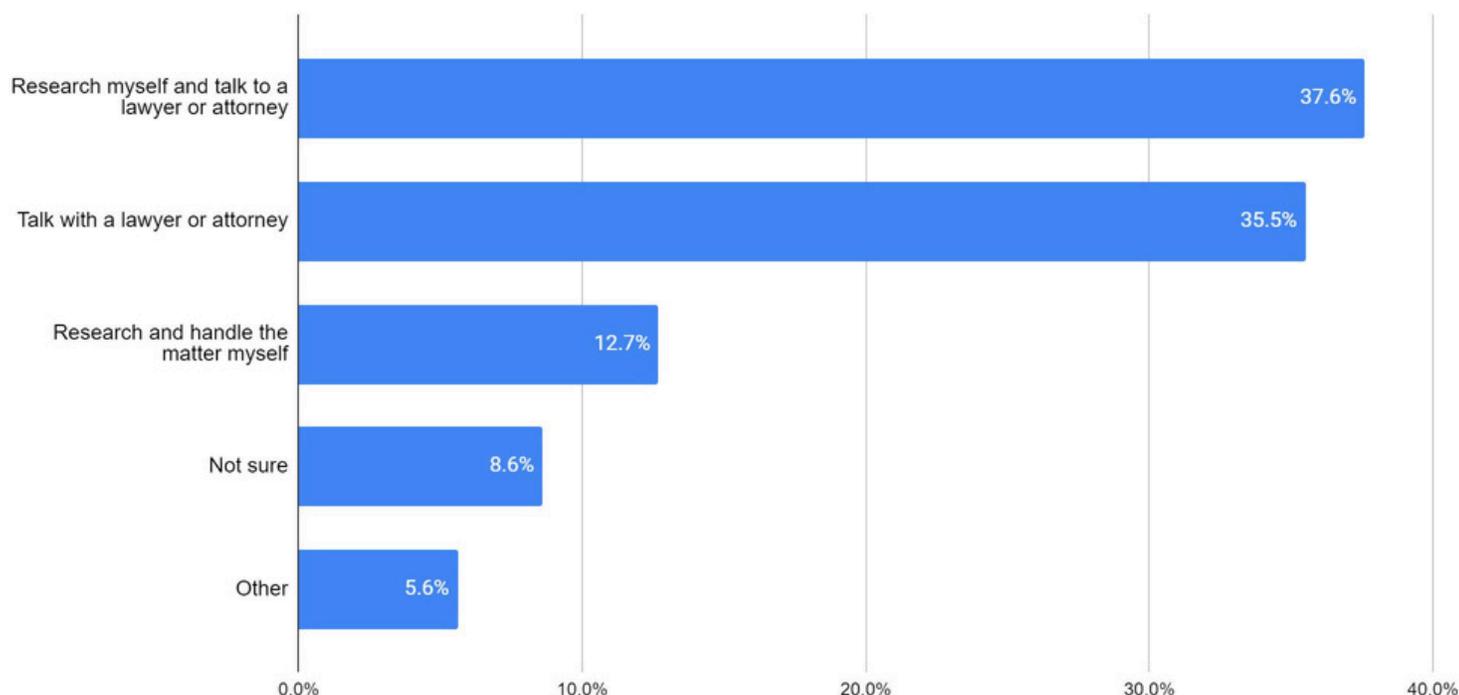
The top five legal needs were landlord-tenant (13.9%), family planning / child custody (13.9%), criminal defense (9.6%), real estate (9.6%), and personal injury (9.5%).

Relative to last year, both landlord-tenant and real estate had stronger presences, perhaps partly attributable to recent trends in both the rental and housing markets. However, part of the shifts relative to prior years can also be attributed to gradual declines in other areas of practice.

Nonetheless, consumers reported having a wide variety of legal needs. This is reinforced by the nearly 30% of consumers who had a legal need that fell into the category of “other” -- a category that spanned many different practice areas.

7 in 10 legal consumers plan to talk to an attorney about their legal matter

How do/did you plan to handle your most recent legal matter?



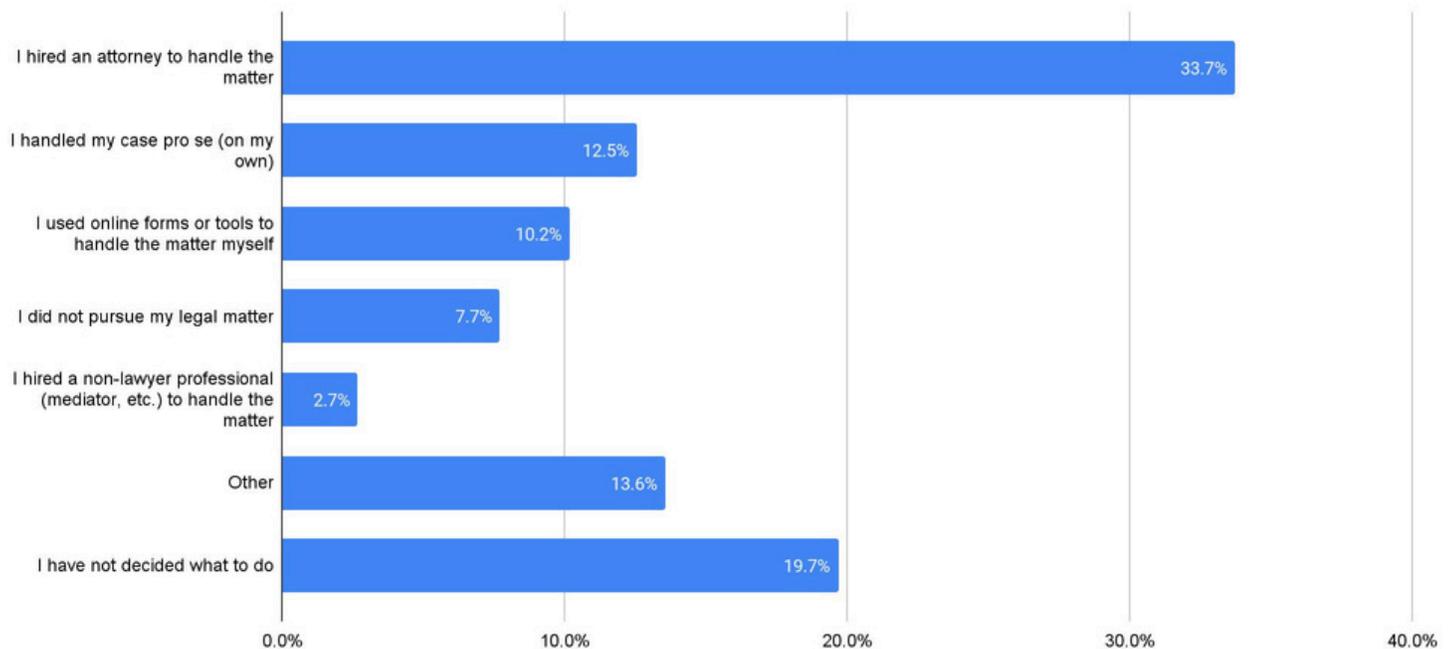
Overall, we saw a strong preference for talking to an attorney about legal matters. 7 in 10 (73.1%) said they planned to talk to an attorney, and 1 in 3 (35.5%) planned to do so without doing any research into their legal matter.

While 1 in 2 legal consumers (50.3%) expressed a preference for researching their legal matter, a majority of this group wanted to talk to an attorney as well. Just 12.7% planned to do their own research and not hire an attorney.

Most legal consumers hire an attorney to handle their legal matter

How did you ultimately end up handling your most recent legal matter?

Note: Individuals who expected a legal need in the future were not asked this question.



Of consumers who had decided on a solution for their legal issue, the most common choice was to hire a lawyer. Despite this, we also saw a fair number of consumers who were undecided about to how handle their legal issue, as well as consumers who opted to pursue other routes.

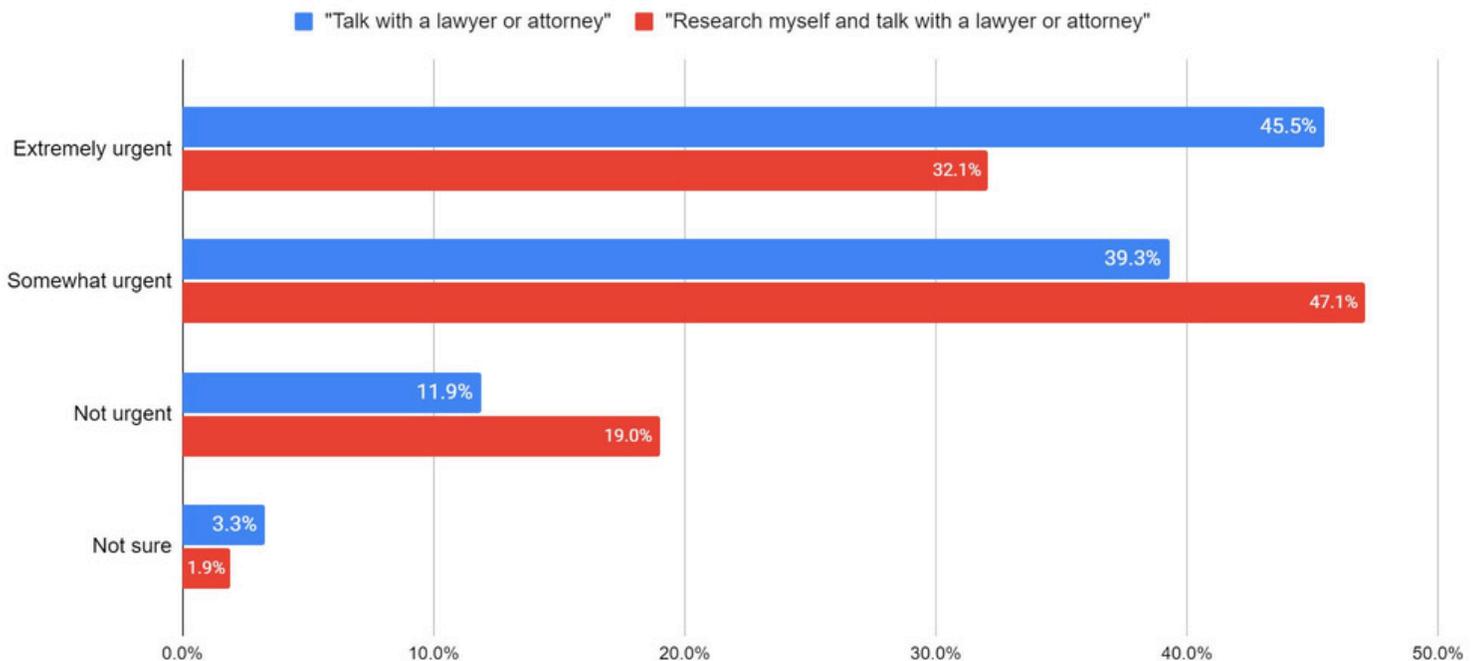
Overall, it's important to remember that engaging with consumers, having a solid online reputation, and responding quickly to consumer inquiries are a key part of being hired by consumers, as well as convincing as-of-yet undecided consumers.

Note that individuals with higher incomes were more likely to hire overall, but this effect gradually begins to taper off as income exceeds \$50K.

Consumers who plan to talk to an attorney most often say they need to do so urgently

How urgent was/ is it for you to engage with a lawyer or attorney?

Note: Responses are shown in context of plans for handling most recent legal issue. Refer to the legend for details.



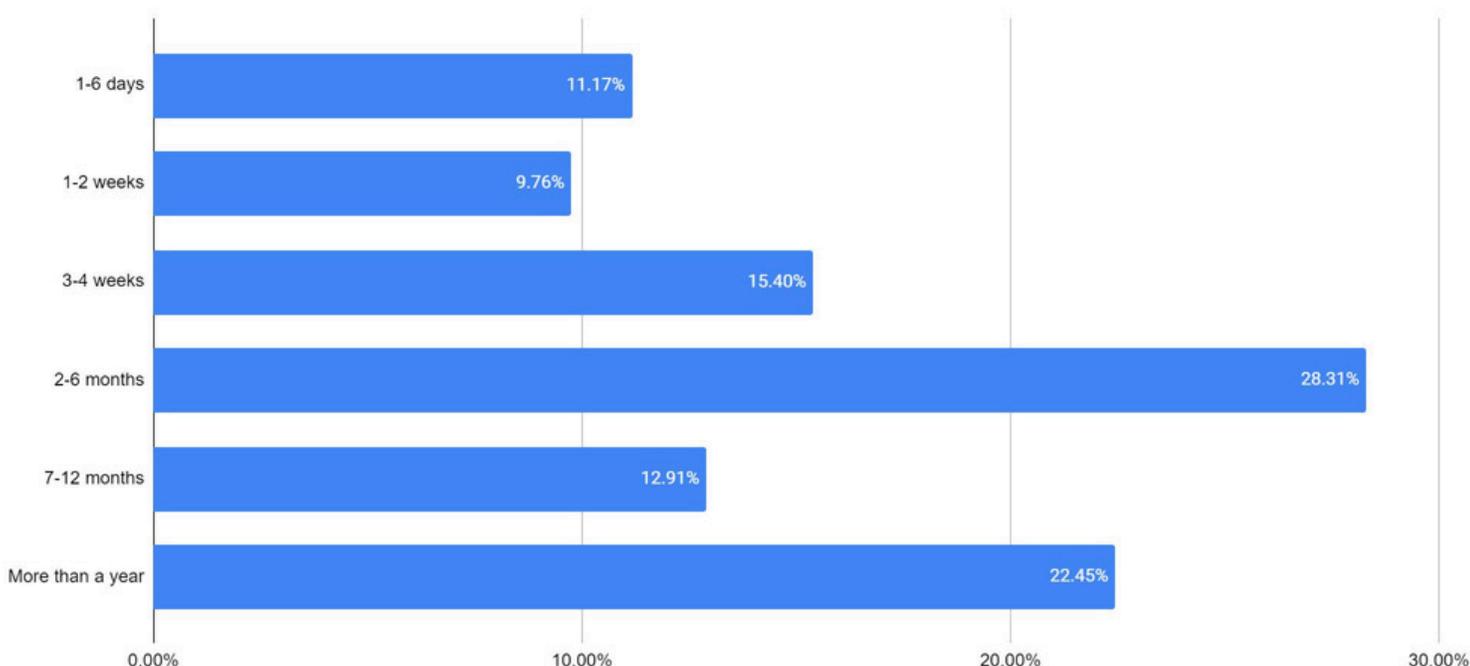
More than 4 in 5 people (84.8%) who planned to talk to a lawyer said their legal matter was “extremely” or “somewhat” urgent. Additionally, nearly 4 in 5 people (79.1%) who planned to research *and* talk to a lawyer also said the same.

The main differences we see relate to urgency level. People who said they only wanted to talk to an attorney were more likely to describe their matter as extremely urgent (45.5% vs. 32.1%). Meanwhile, those who planned to research and talk with a lawyer were more likely to describe it as somewhat urgent (47.1% vs. 39.3%) or not urgent (19.0% vs. 11.9%).

Two-thirds of consumers report resolving their legal matter in six months or less

How long did your most recent legal matter take to resolve? (excludes responses of N/A)

Note: This question was only asked of individuals with a current or past legal need.

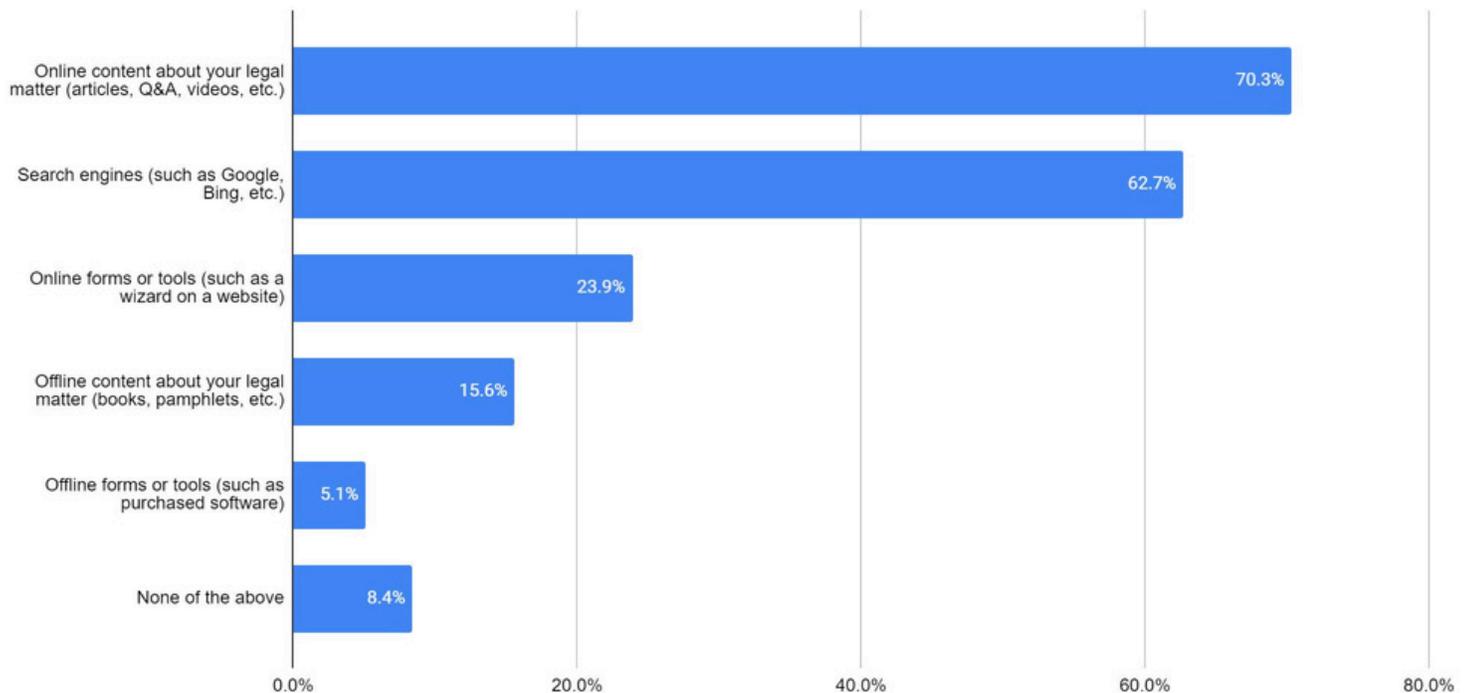


Excluding individuals who had not yet resolved their legal need, we found that nearly two-thirds of consumers (64.64%) reported resolving their matter in 6 months or less, and just over one-third (36.33%) resolved it in the first month.

Nonetheless, a decent number of consumers -- more than 1 in 5 (22.45%) experienced a legal matter that took more than a year to resolve.

Online content remains the main resource consumers use when handling a legal matter

Did you use any of the following resources when handling your legal matter? (select all that apply)

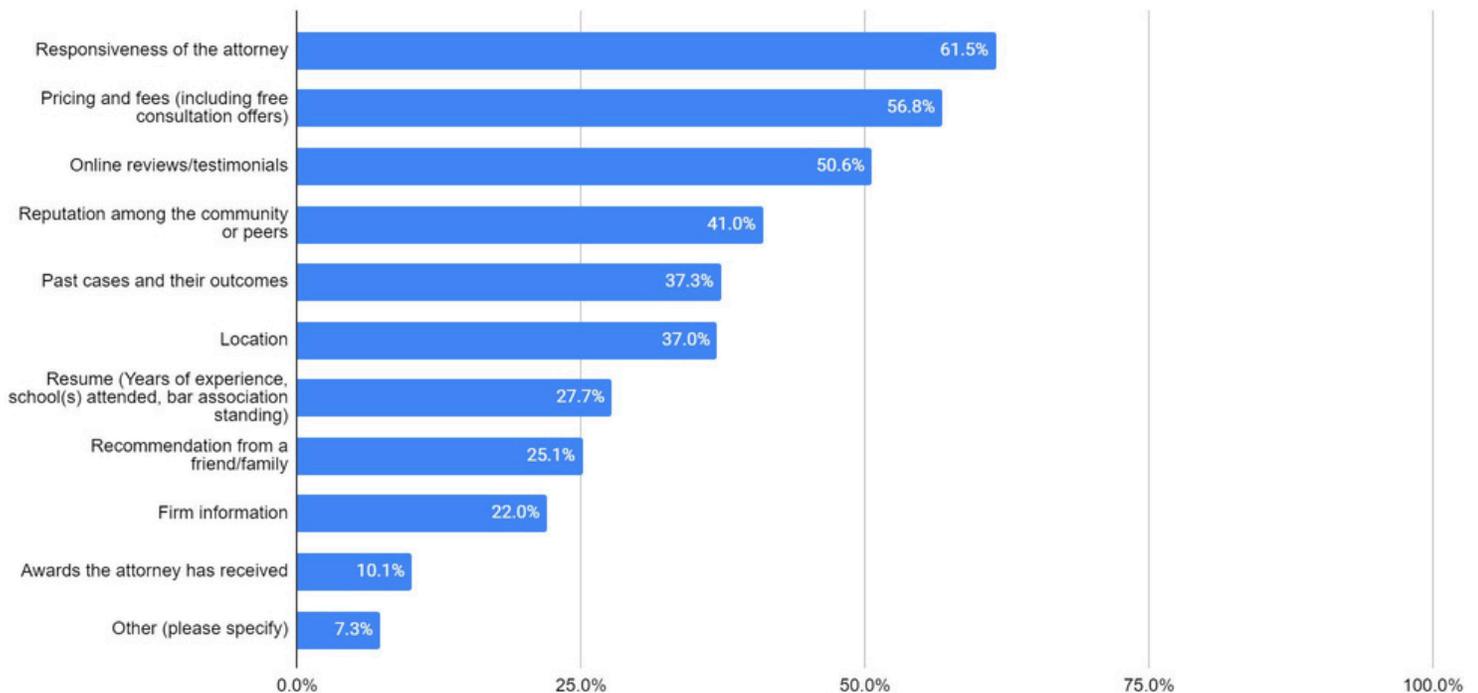


Within the context of *handling* their legal matter (as opposed to more general activities relating to a legal matter), we saw that consumers exhibited a preference for online resources. Content -- such as articles, Q&A, or videos, led the way alongside search engines like Google or Bing.

In fact, when looking at the combination of people who mentioned online resources, we found that 86% of respondents noted using some type of online resource when handling their legal matter. By contrast, offline resources saw noticeably lower use. Also notable was the fact that just 8.4% said they did not use any of the listed resources at all.

Consumers find responsiveness, pricing information, and online reviews to be most helpful when looking for an attorney

What information was / is most helpful when looking for an attorney? (select all that apply)



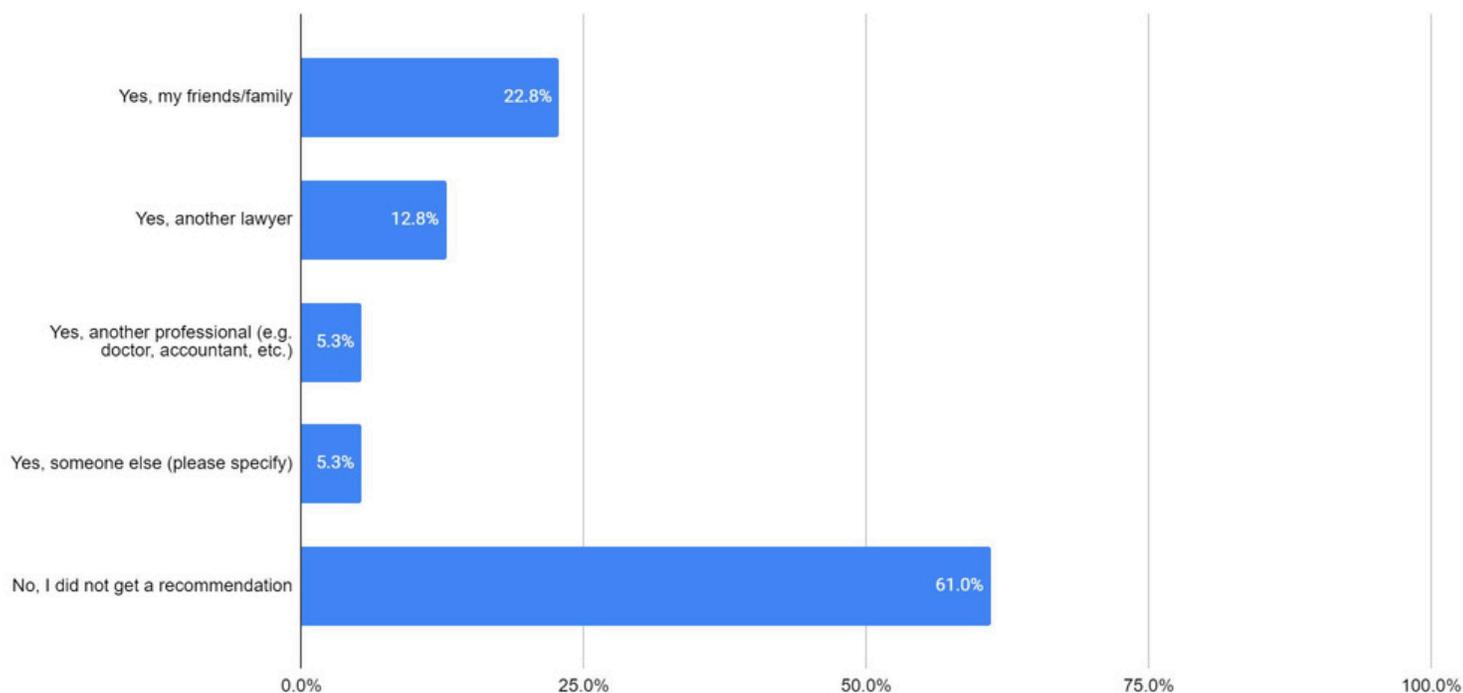
The top helpful criteria when looking for an attorney were attorney responsiveness (61.5%), information on pricing / fees (56.8%), and online reviews or testimonials (50.6%).

In line with prior research, younger people value reviews more highly (the under 35 crowd puts reviews at 58.4% compared to 50.6% for the general population). The opposite is also true -- those 55+ value them at 43.9%.

Among consumers who reported hiring an attorney, we saw increased valuation of a few key criteria used when looking for an attorney, namely online reviews (57.3% vs. 50.6%), resume (33.9% vs. 27.7%), and recommendations (31.2% vs. 25.1%).

4 in 10 consumers are recommended an attorney - most often by friends or family

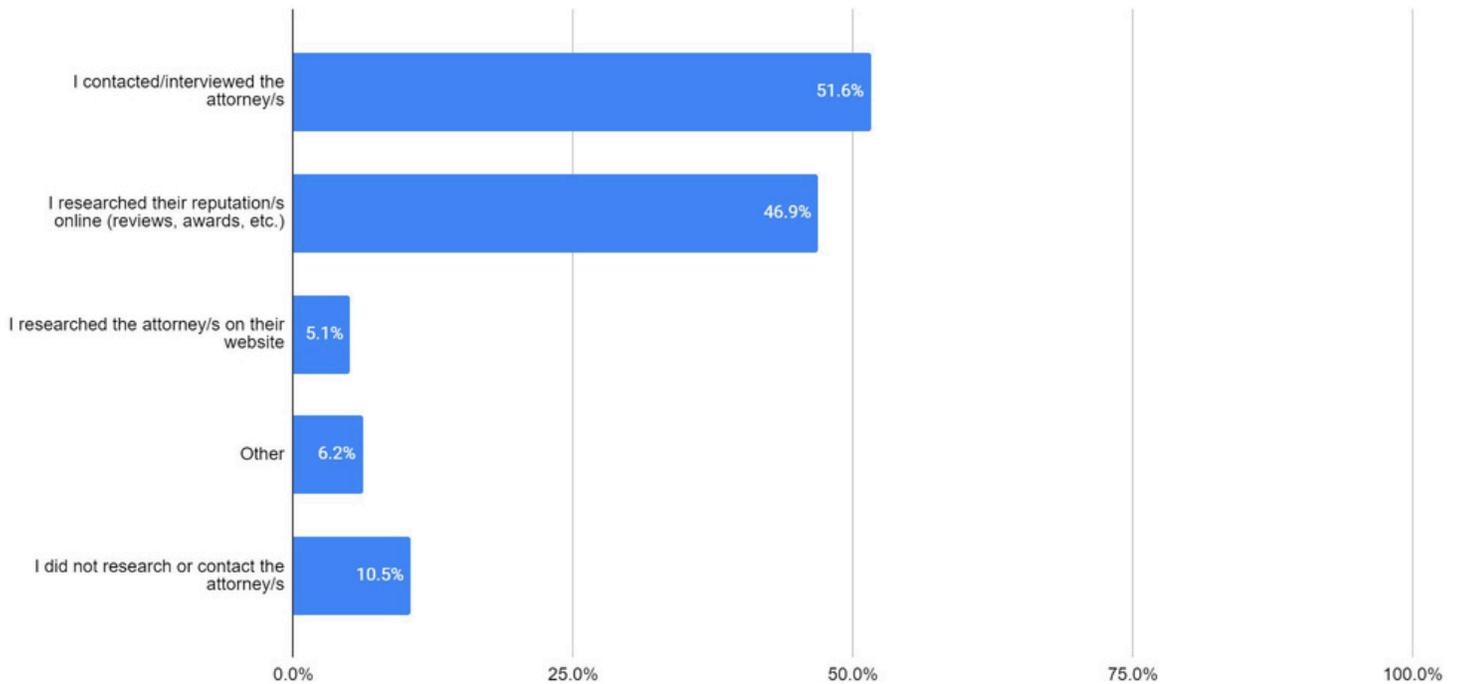
Did anyone recommend an attorney to you? (select all that apply)



Overall, approximately 4 in 10 (39.0%) consumers got an attorney recommendation, with the most common source being friends / family, followed by other attorneys. 6 in 10 (61.0%) did not get a recommendation.

Nearly 90% of consumers who get an attorney recommendation look into that attorney, and 1 in 2 contact

Did you research or contact an attorney you were recommended? (select all that apply)

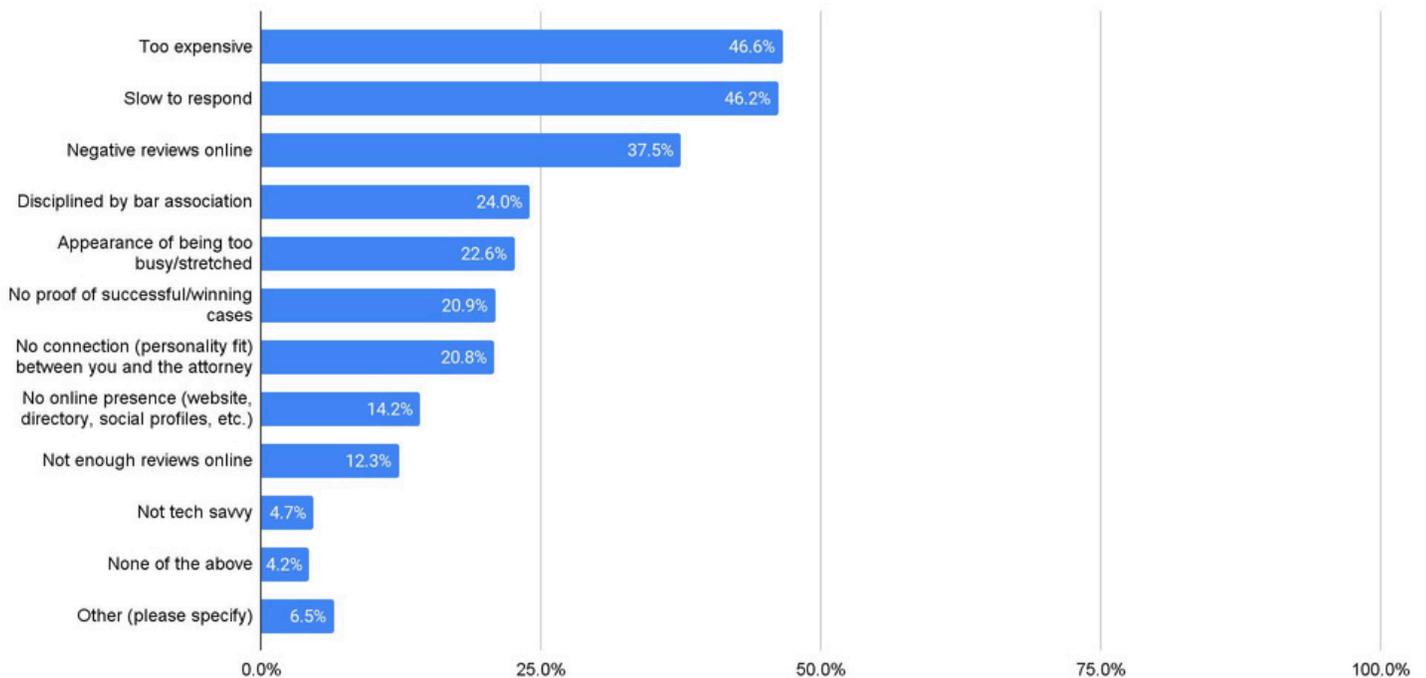


Among consumers who got a recommendation, most decided to look into the recommended attorney to some extent. Just 1 in 10 (10.5%) reported that they “did not research or contact the attorney.”

Notably, 46.9% reported researching the recommended attorney’s reputation online, meaning almost half of consumers will look at reputational factors like reviews even if they already have a recommendation from a friend, family member, or other source.

Cost, slow response time, and negative online reviews lead the biggest deterrents to hiring an attorney for a legal matter

What are the 3 biggest deterrents (or red flags) to hiring a particular attorney? (select up to 3)



We asked consumers to name their top three deterrents for hiring an attorney. Overall:

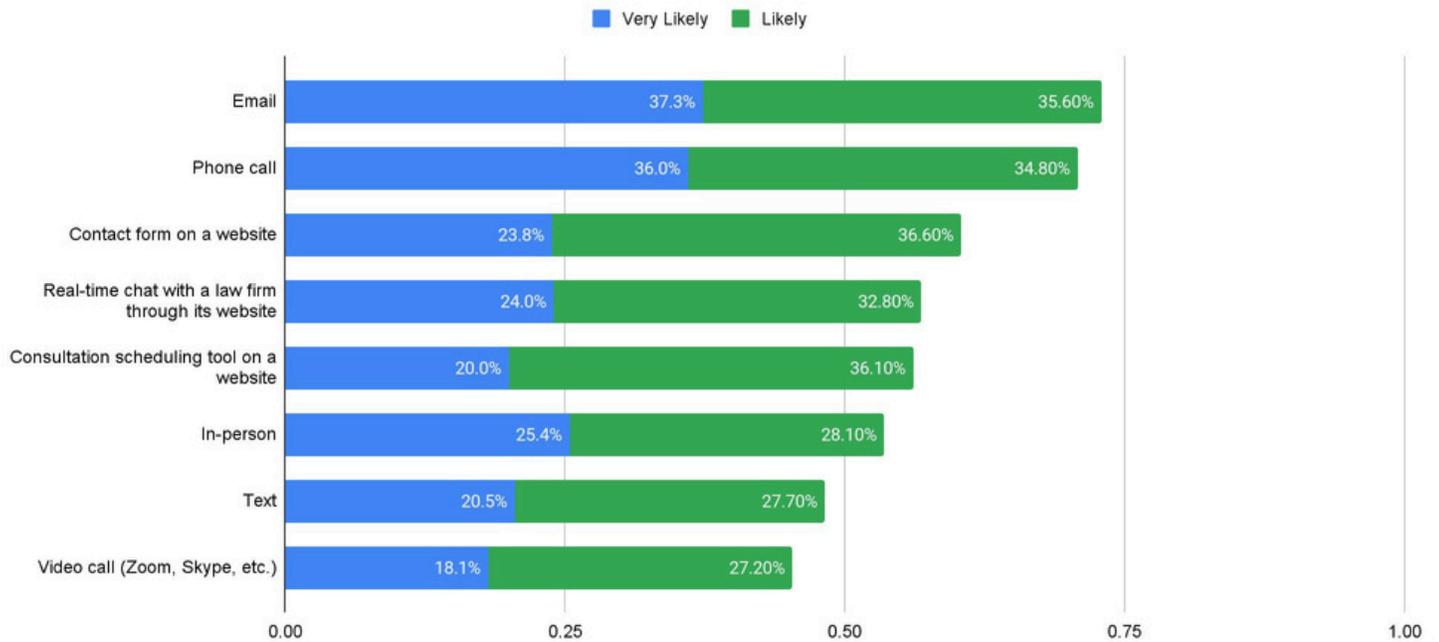
- Too expensive -- 46.6%
- Slow to respond -- 46.2%
- Negative reviews -- 37.5%
- Disciplined by bar -- 24.0%
- Too busy -- 22.6%

The top 3 in particular parallel the top 3 most valued criteria when looking for an attorney: responsiveness (61.5%), information on pricing / fees (56.8%), and online reviews or testimonials (50.6%).

Email and phone calls are preferred contact methods for initially reaching out to an attorney, but other methods are on the rise

How likely are you to use the following methods when initially contacting an attorney?

Note: Chart shows only responses of "very likely" and "likely"

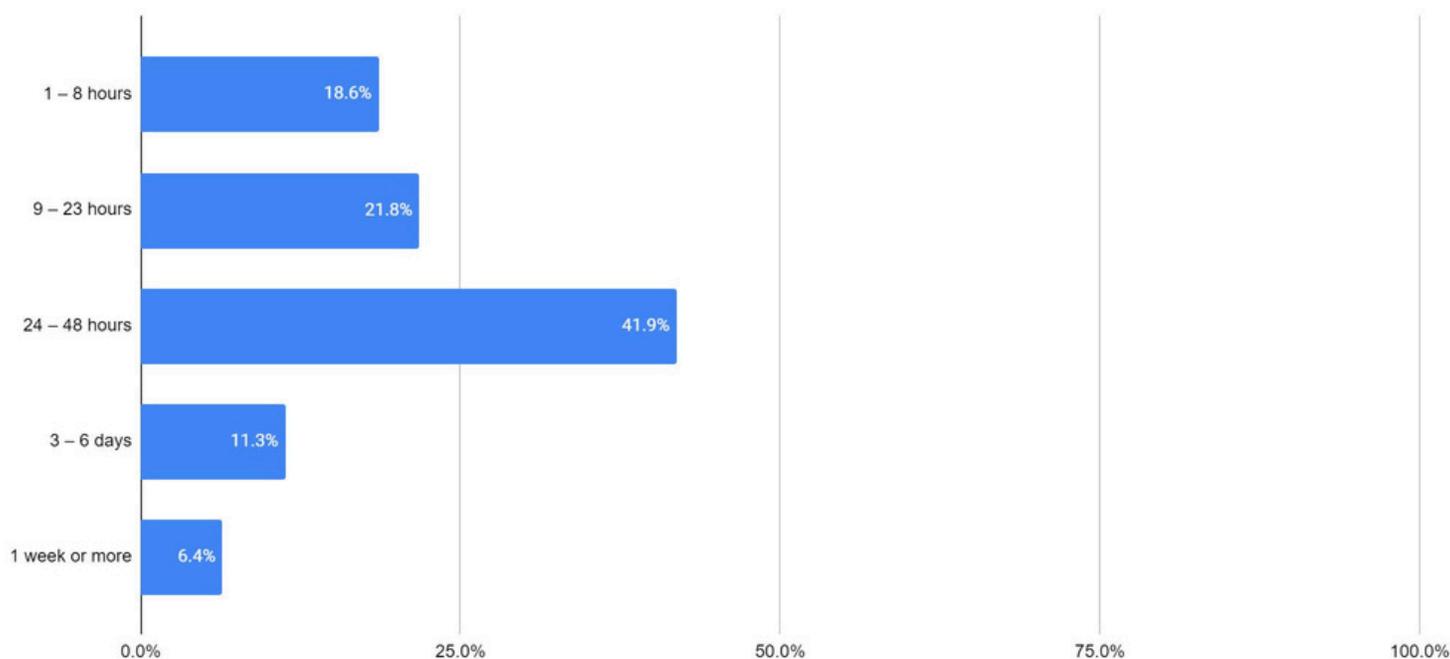


Relative to last year, email popularity relative to phone calls, and, for the first time, has taken the top position by a slight margin. This may be symptomatic of a broader generational shift where those aged 44 or younger prefer email, and those aged 45 or older prefer phone calls. Despite this difference, both remain popular contact methods over others by a wide margin.

More stark in its differences is the YoY changes in preferences for other digital methods like text messaging or video calls among different age groups -- each successive generation is noticeably more comfortable using these methods of contact, even though phone and email retain their top spots..

A strong majority of consumers say they will contact another attorney if they don't hear anything after 48 hours

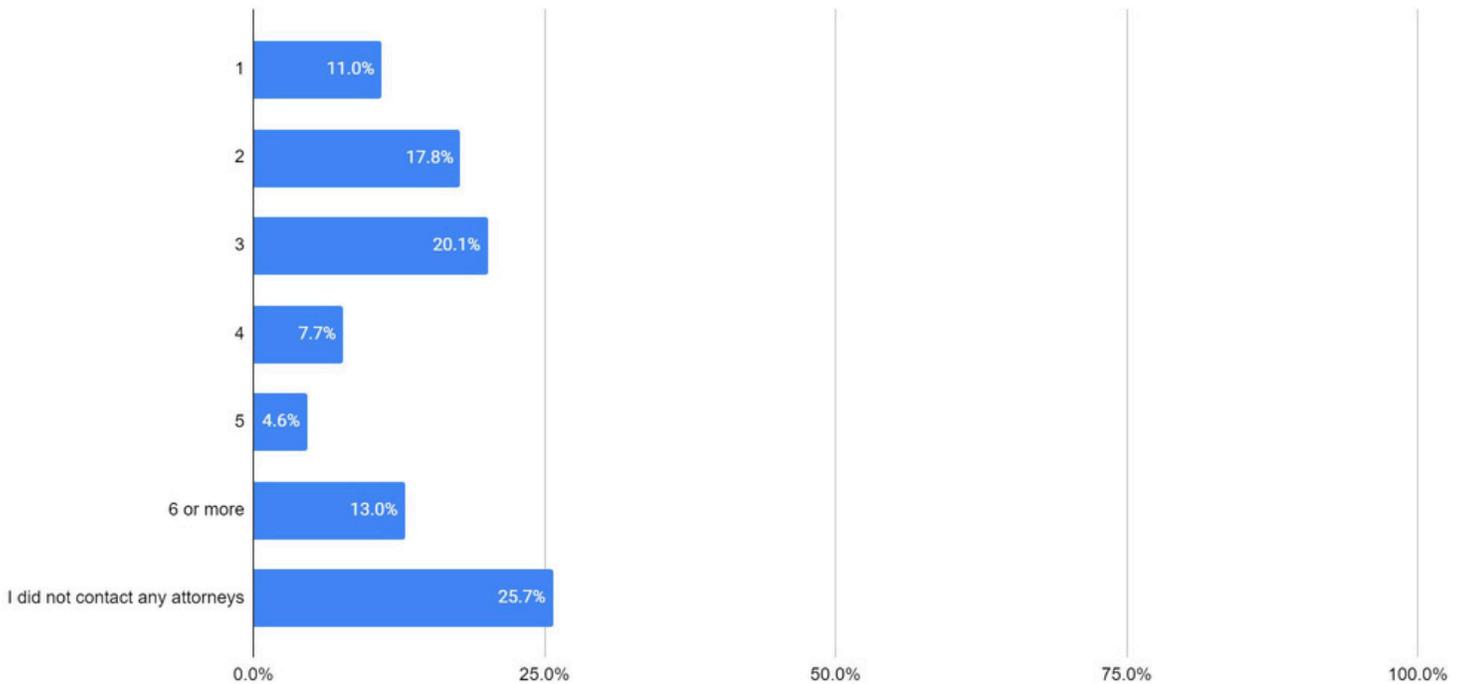
If you had contacted an attorney you were thinking about hiring, how long (on average) would you wait to hear back before contacting someone else?



When it comes to getting hired by consumers, having a prompt response time is important. Over 80% of consumers will contact another attorney if they don't hear back in 48 hours. Two in five (40.4%) will contact another attorney if they don't hear back in 24 hours. And almost one in five (18.6%) would wait 8 hours or less before contacting someone else.

Most consumers will contact multiple attorneys before making a decision

How many attorneys did you contact before making a hiring decision?

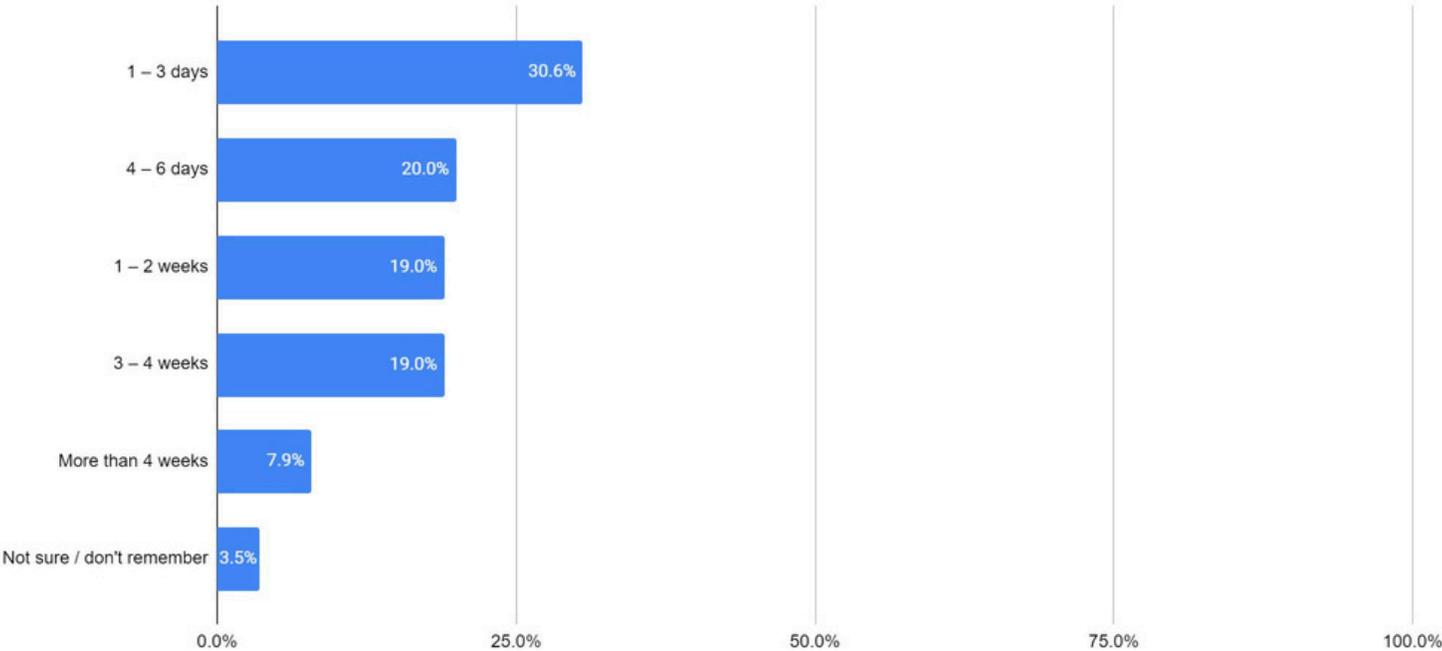


In general, most people who contact attorneys will contact more than one, usually at least 1 or 2 attorneys beyond the first. This ties back to the urgency aspect we have seen earlier - most believe their legal matter to be urgent, and will reach out to another attorney if they don't hear back soon -- and may potentially reach out to several attorneys right from the start.

Notably, 4 out of 5 consumers (78.9%) who ultimately decided to hire a lawyer contacted more than one attorney before making that hiring decision.

One in two consumers go from knowing they need an attorney for their legal matter to deciding who to hire within a week

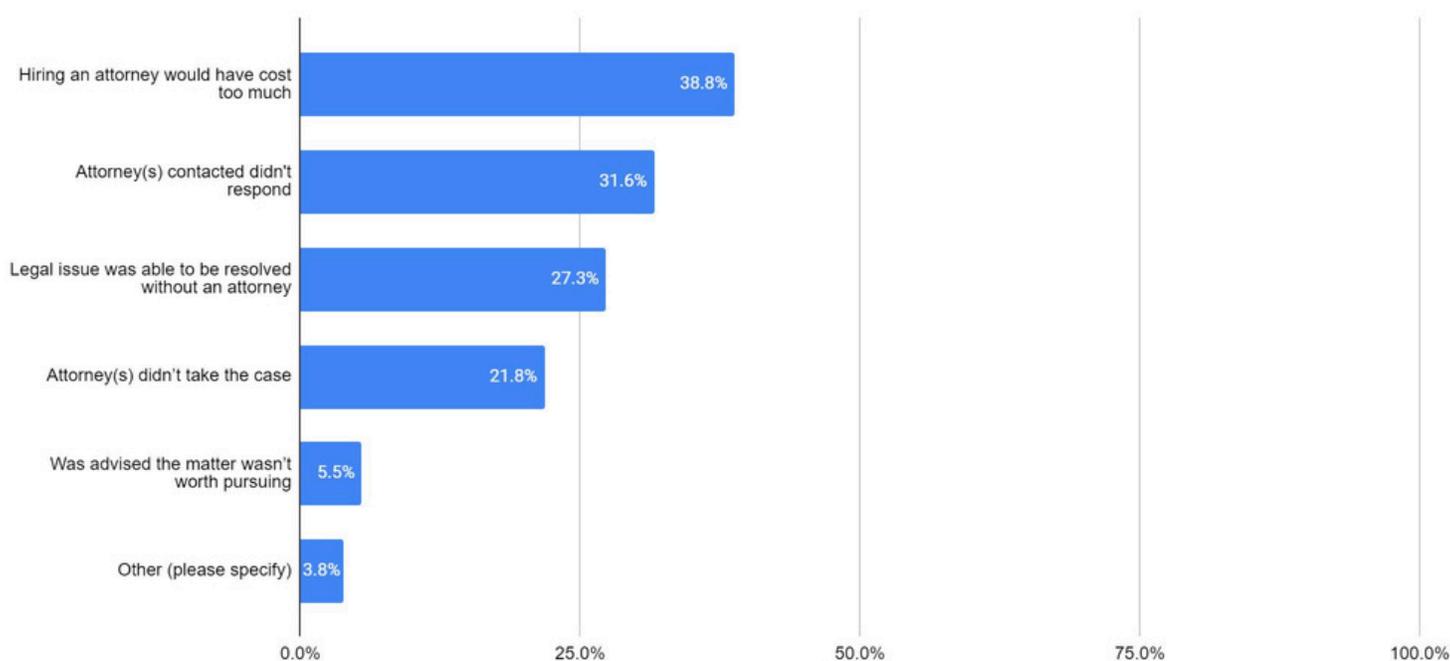
You mentioned that you hired an attorney for your legal matter. About how long did this take? (From the moment you knew you needed an attorney to making a decision on one attorney.)



Further reinforcing the aspect of urgency we've seen elsewhere in this report, many legal consumers come to a hiring decision in relatively short order (once they know they need an attorney). 3 out of 10 consumers who hired an attorney hired within 3 days of realizing they needed an attorney, and 5 in 10 hired within a week,

Cost remains the main reason for not hiring, but the number of attorneys not responding when contacted has risen considerably

You mentioned that you did not hire an attorney for your legal matter. What was the main reason for this?

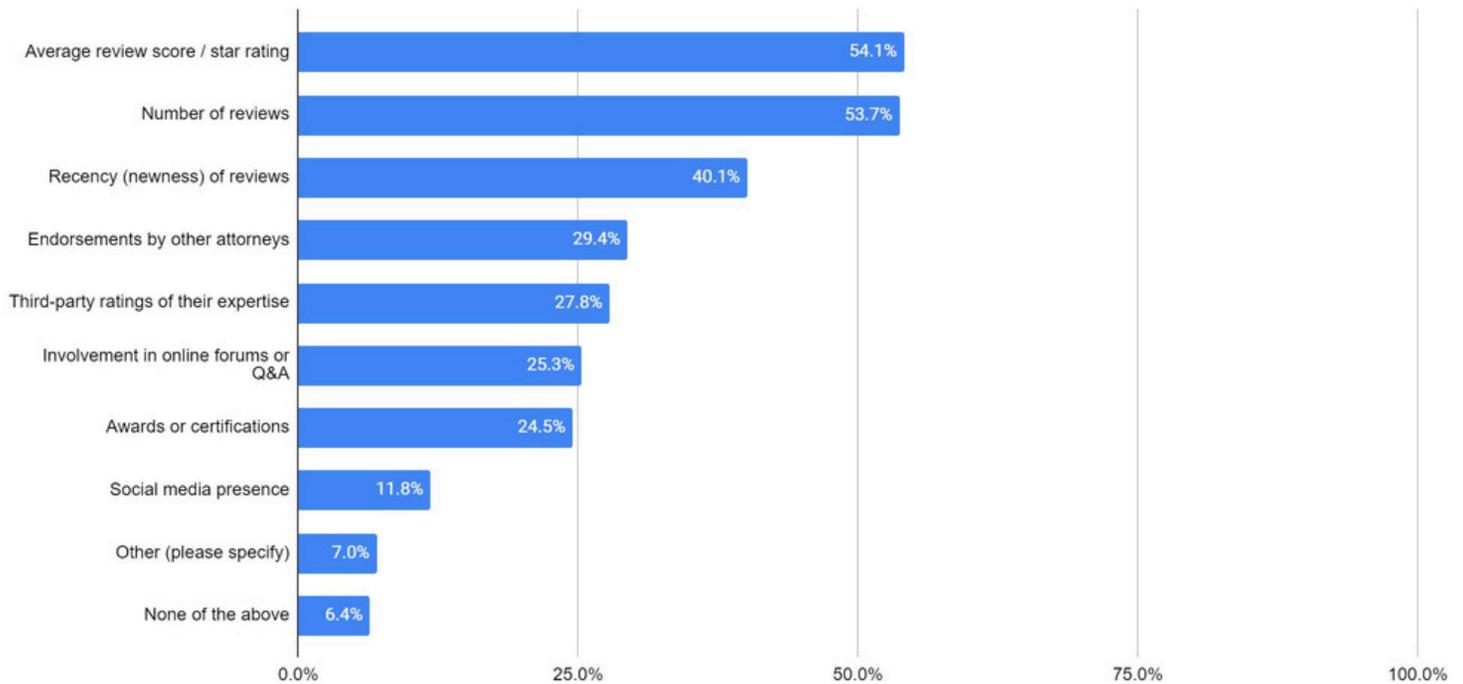


Perhaps unsurprisingly, cost remains the primary barrier for many when it comes to hiring an attorney, echoing findings elsewhere that found information on pricing and fees to be a highly important factor when looking at attorneys, and excessive cost to be a significant detriment when making a hiring decision.

More interesting is that the reported reason of “attorneys contacted didn’t respond” has effectively doubled from 2022 (31.6% vs. 14.0%). Keeping in mind that consumers emphasized the urgency of their matter and the need for a prompt response, this is a troubling finding.

Top three criteria for online reputation all relate to online reviews

What do you think are important parts of an attorney's online reputation? (select all that apply)



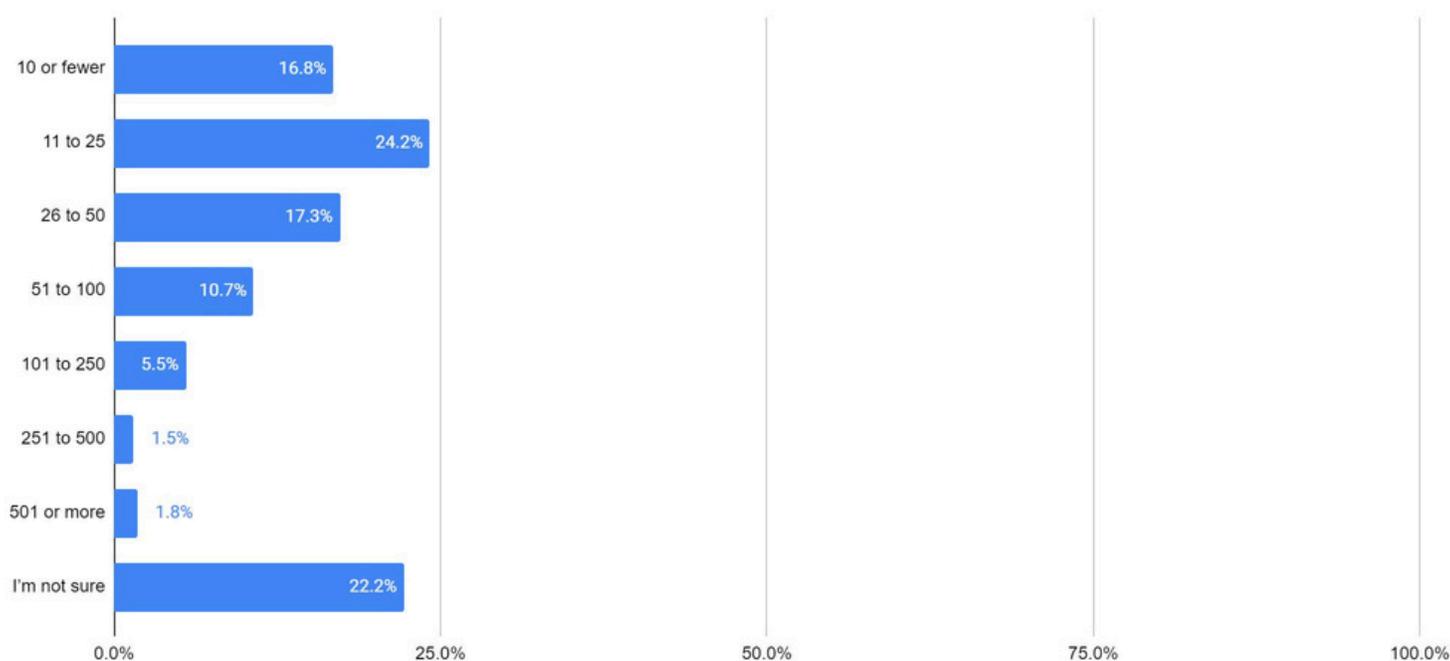
We asked consumers what the most important parts of an attorney's online reputation were, and found the top 5 to be as follows:

- Average review score / star rating -- 54.1%
- Number of reviews -- 53.7%
- Recency of reviews -- 40.1%
- Endorsements by other attorneys -- 29.4%
- Third-party ratings of expertise -- 27.8%

The big takeaway here? The top 3 are all review-related by a noticeable margin. More interesting is that the *number* of reviews was virtually just as important as the score itself, and the *recency* of those reviews not far behind -- so it's important to keep getting reviews.

A substantial number of consumers say 11+ reviews are the minimum number of reviews they want to see when making a hire decision

When trying to decide if you would hire a particular attorney, what is the minimum amount of reviews from their previous clients you'd want to see?



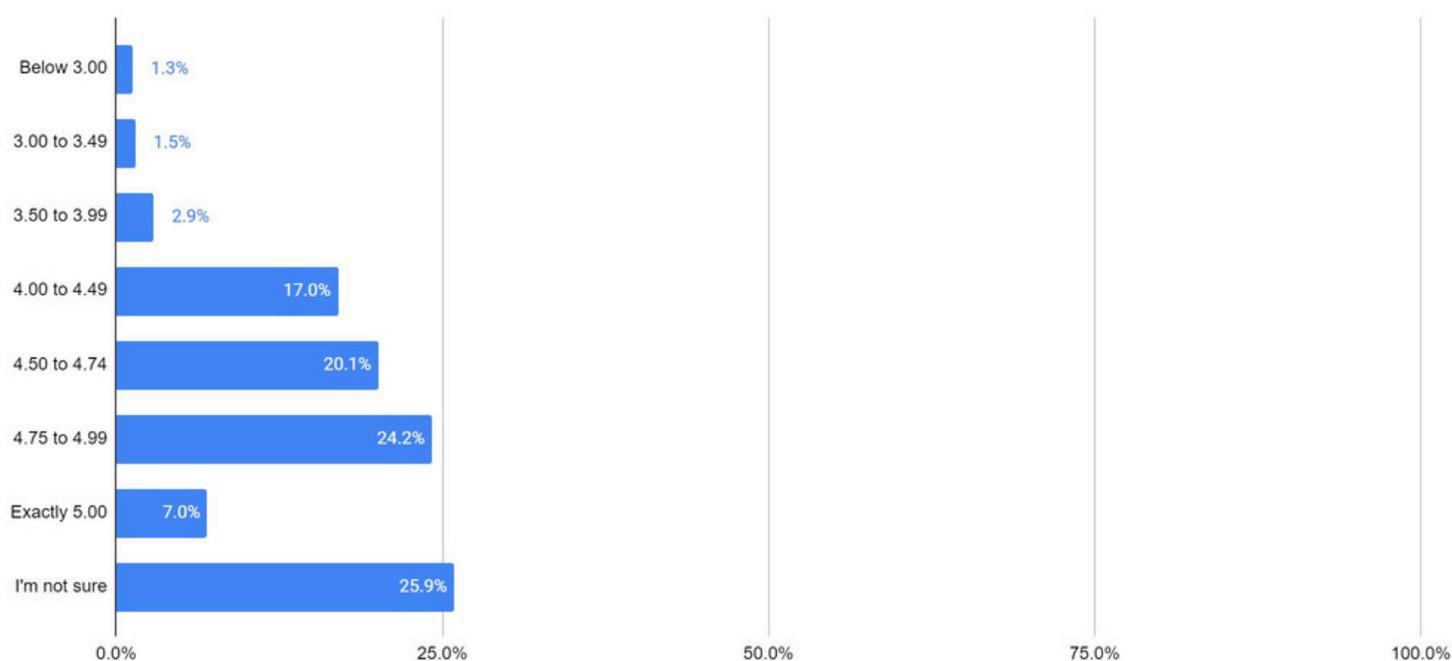
Reflecting our earlier findings that “number of reviews” was viewed as one of the most important reputational criteria next to average review score, we also found that most consumers wanted to see a good number of reviews when making a hiring decision on an attorney.

Just 16.8% of consumers said “10 or fewer” was the minimum number of reviews they wanted to see. By comparison, 61.0% said they wanted to see more than 10, rising to 78.4% if excluding answers of “not sure.” And remember -- this is the minimum number they wanted to see.

In other words -- making sure you have a good number of client reviews is critical.

Consumers trust an average review score of 4.75 to 4.99 the most when trying to decide if they would hire a particular attorney

When trying to decide if you would hire a particular attorney, which average review score would you trust the most?



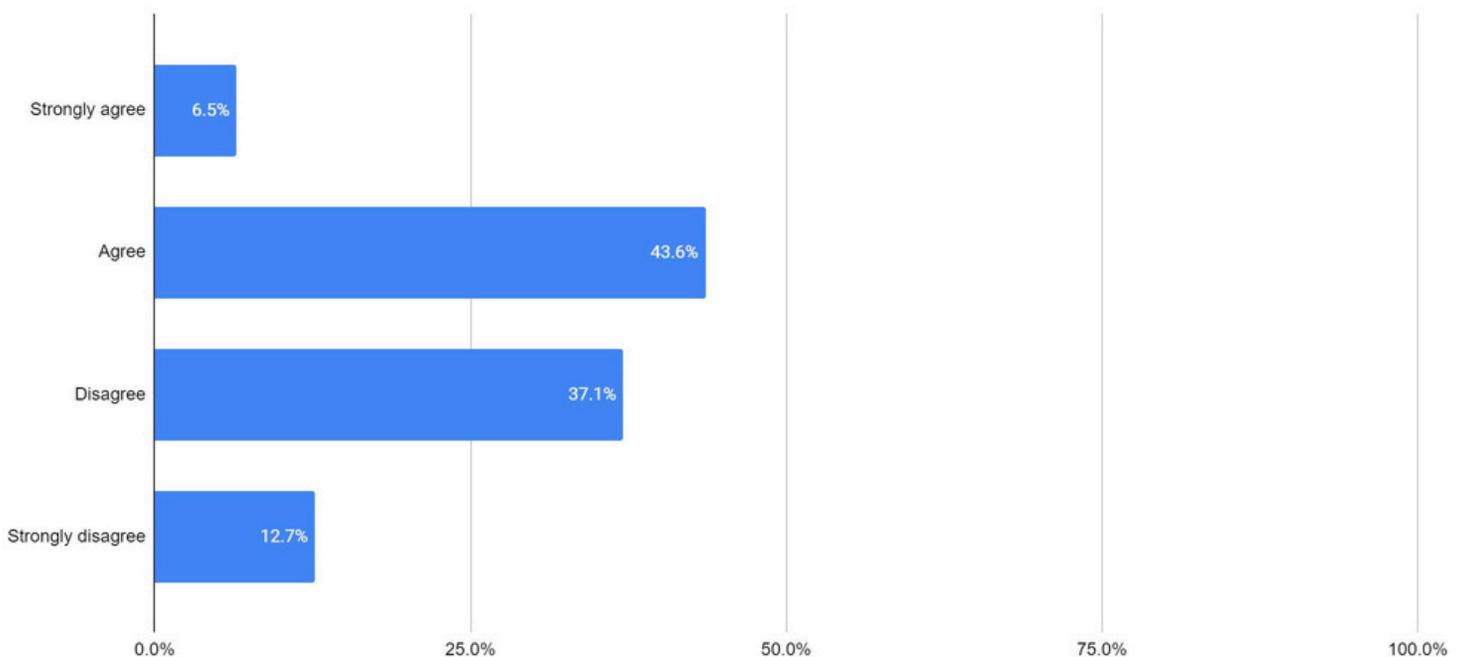
This year we endeavored to study what review scores consumers trusted the most when looking for an attorney, as recent research in the online shopping field has indicated that consumers trust “almost perfect” average review scores more than they do “perfect” average review scores.

We found similar results within the legal field -- the most trusted scores were 4.75 to 4.99 (24.2%), 4.50 to 4.75 (20.1%), and 4.00 to 4.49 (17.0%). An exact score of 5.0 followed afterwards at 7.0%. Note, though, that few consumers would trust any score below 4.0.

While this doesn't mean people with perfect 5.0s are doing anything wrong or that they should seek out negative feedback, it does mean that attorneys shouldn't panic if they get a single negative review. As long as you have a large amount of positive reviews to balance it out, consumers are actually even more likely to trust your reviews when making a hiring decision.

Consumers evenly split on belief that most lawyers have their best interests in mind

Please rate your agreement with the statement: "I believe most lawyers are trustworthy and will look out for my best interests."

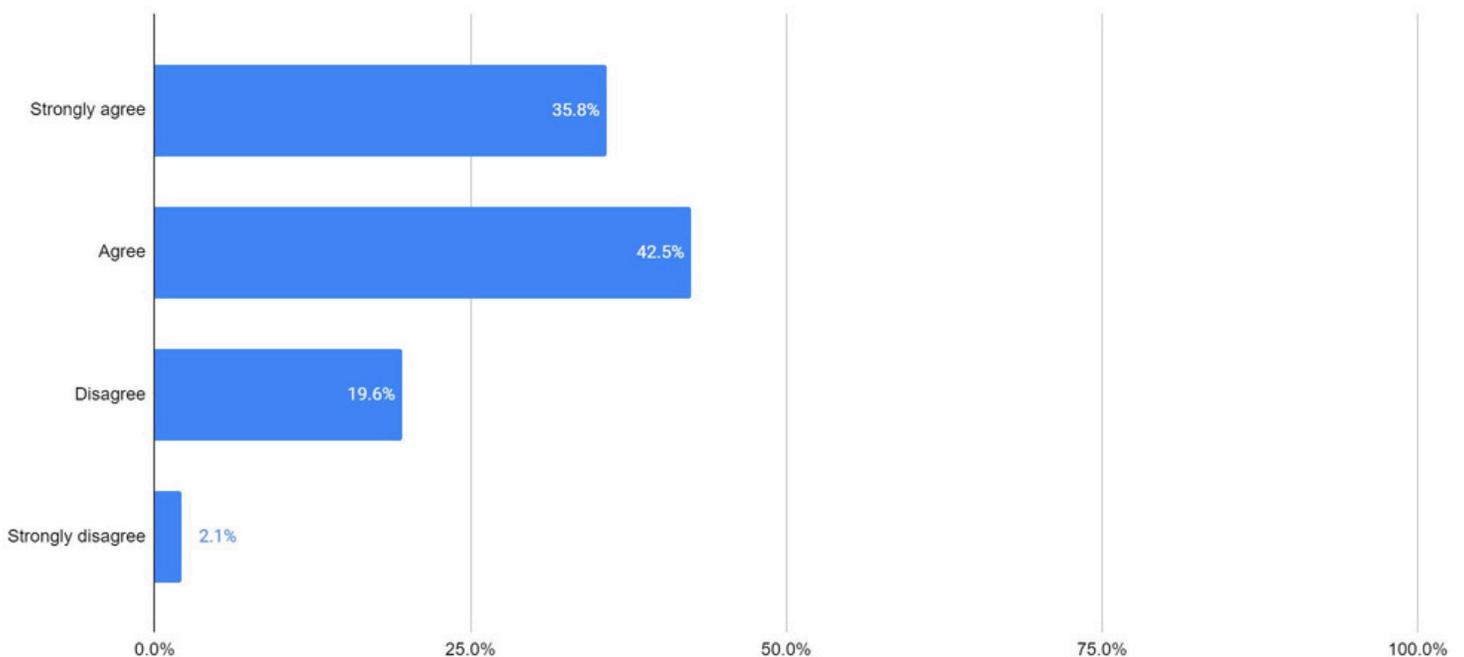


Consumers were almost evenly split on believing lawyers had their best interests at heart, with 50.2% agreeing and 49.8% disagreeing. Those who felt that lawyers were not trustworthy were more likely to have strong opinions on the matter.

Interestingly, whether or not a consumer actually hired a lawyer had almost no effect on how much they trusted lawyers. What a consumer decided to do if they did not hire a lawyer, however, was affected by this. Just 44.0% of pro se individuals said they trusted lawyers, as compared to 50.2% of the survey group overall.

Most consumers still express a desire to be able to meet their lawyer in-person

Please rate your agreement with the statement: "I'd want to meet a lawyer in-person if I were using them to get help with my legal issues."

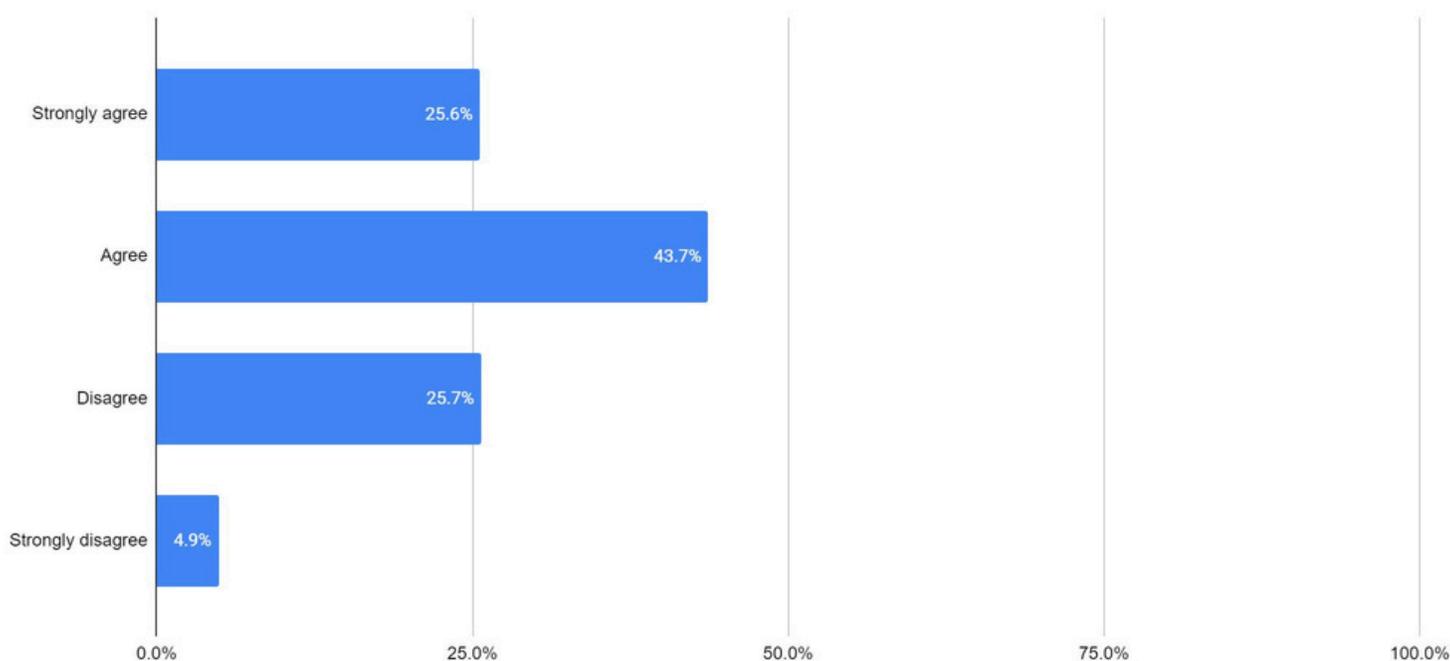


Despite a growing openness towards digital methods of communication, most consumers still wanted to be able meet their attorney in-person (at least once).

Just under 80% wished to meet a lawyer in person if they were using them to get help with their legal issues, and 35.8% had a particularly strong desire to do so.

Two-thirds of consumers feel that if they had a legal issue, they would need to depend on a lawyer to guide them through the process

Please rate your agreement with the statement: "If I have a legal issue, I would depend completely on my lawyer to guide me through the process."



While we did see a degree of variation in answers, just over two-thirds (69.3%) of consumers felt that if they had a legal issue, they would find themselves dependant on their lawyer to guide themselves through the process, with around one in four (25.6%) feeling strongly about this.