



Sink or swim: How to adapt to the New Legal Consumer

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A new world, a new consumer



Every day, lawyers struggle. They struggle to win cases for their clients, protect their clients' interests, and make their clients' dreams come true. They work hard to keep current and stay knowledgeable, and to learn as much as they can about the laws and legal processes that can make or break their cases. Good lawyers work hard at all of this.

“Technology has sparked a consumer revolution, one that has affected how people engage with the legal space and with legal solutions.”

But most lawyers are also business people. As they do law, they also struggle to grow, manage, and preserve their practices, a fundamental part of which is winning new clients. Every business – legal or not – needs to reach out to consumers and draw them in. And as many successful businesses know, in order to draw consumers in effectively, one must understand what makes them tick. This is no less true in the legal profession than it is in any other industry.

Understanding the legal consumer is more relevant now than ever because technology has sparked a consumer revolution. Over the past several years we have seen broad, sweeping changes in the way individuals shop for and purchase a wide variety of goods and services. Today's consumers have more information at their fingertips than ever before, have quick and easy access to the opinions and experiences of others, and are exposed to a wider variety of products and services than in the past. Engaging with them requires new thinking. In some cases, it means re-envisioning what it means to best serve those with legal needs.

This paper will tell you how to adapt to the New Legal Consumer and why it should be done. First, we will discuss who this New Legal Consumer is, and where they come from. Second, we will tell you how this consumer behaves as they look for legal solutions. And third, we will demonstrate how even one small change in your practice can mean becoming more relevant to those you hope to serve.

In this whitepaper you will learn:

- 1 Who is the New Legal Consumer, and where did they come from?
- 2 How does this consumer look for legal solutions?
- 3 How can you adapt to win them over?

The New Legal Consumer is riding the tide of broad social change that has incredible momentum. Convincing today's consumers to resolve their issues in traditional ways is a losing battle. Rather, lawyers must be armed with knowledge so they can adjust to changes in the consumer landscape and ensure that their practices survive in our technological age.

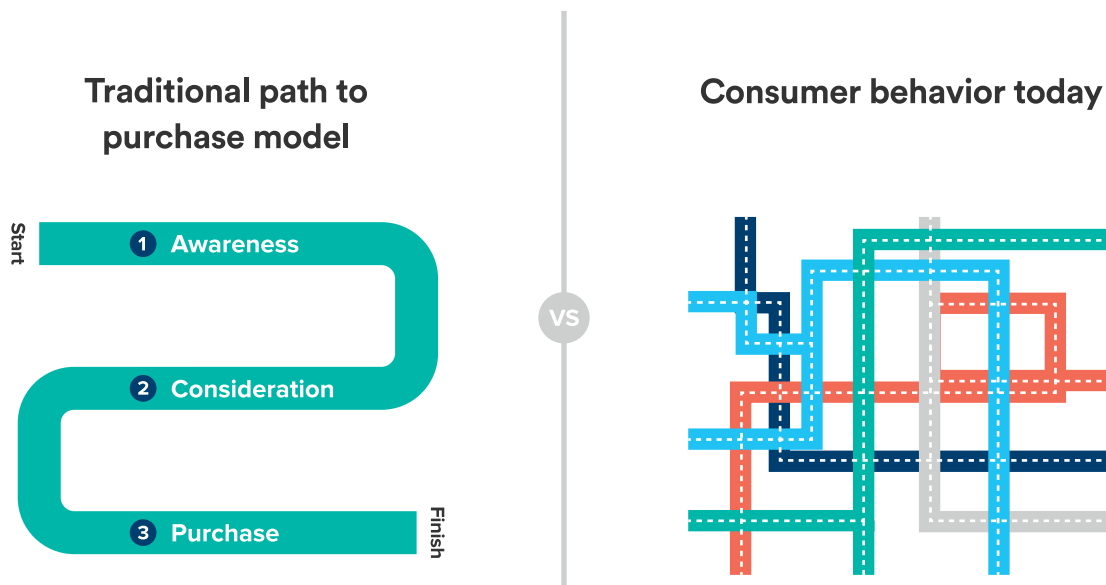
Technology has changed consumer behavior

Technology is the single mechanism that has shaped modern consumer behavior. It has made previously unavailable information easily available, brought people together who are otherwise strangers, and has exposed people to many more products, services, and solutions than any consumer before them has seen. Lawyers, when acting as consumers, are part of the technology-driven consumer revolution as well. If you purchase your plane tickets online, buy books or other items on Amazon, research your next new laptop on your old one, purchase transportation on an app, or read reviews for a restaurant before becoming a patron, you are very much behaving like the modern consumer.



“Lawyers are modern consumers as well. The way they shop for and purchase most items is similar to how others shop for and purchase legal solutions.”

The way modern consumers shop for and purchase a variety of products and services day-to-day carries over into how they shop for legal solutions. The New Legal Consumer is self-directed. They do not always come to lawyers first or follow traditional patterns in seeking help. In fact, no clear pattern of behavior seems to exist. In the past, one could employ the traditional path-to-purchase sales model (tracking legal consumers from awareness to consideration to hiring a lawyer) or map the “customer journey” in order to predict behavior and drive growth. Today the consumer does not have a clear journey at all. For example, across all categories, it has become increasingly less so that awareness of a brand (or a lawyer) precedes its consideration or purchase (hiring). Access to numerous options means purchases of legal solutions sometimes occur before there is even a real need to consider a particular lawyer or brand. This unpredictability in shopping behavior has led consumer researchers in a number of product and service categories to declare “the death” of the traditional path-to-purchase model and to see the customer journey as non-linear, dynamic, and hard to predict.



The New Legal Consumer does not follow the linear purchase model of the past.

Our conversations with legal consumers echo this. Consumers have described their process of finding a legal solution as unmethodical, a mix of online and offline behavior with no real strategic process, largely because of the information and solutions available to them on the internet. People follow advice from lawyers they don't even know – because these lawyers happened to be online. They hire a lawyer but then go back online to do research. While online, they follow one link after another to a variety of different sources, often reading the same information more than once, much of this information found on other lawyers' websites. They may do this over days, weeks, even months, until their issue is resolved. Eighty-five percent go online weekly to resolve their legal issue (40% are online daily). All of this consumer behavior, taken in aggregate, reveals no one clear journey, no single discernible order to resolving legal issues. The New Legal Consumer's "legal shopping" behavior is an unsystematic exploration of a variety of options that, before the internet, was simply unavailable to them.

This is what legal consumers are saying about technology and legal:

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"Online I like to read sports, go to Amazon, check social media like Facebook, read the news. I go off and do research then come back to Google...I've gotten a lot of good free legal advice on the internet."

"I always find something that interests me online. I find myself going here and there; everything ends up on a different page so I use breadcrumbs to figure out where [which page] I came from. I went online and to set up an LLC. I never talked to a lawyer."

"I go online for shopping and Facebook stuff. I went to Google to find legal stuff."

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Informed, connected, and picky

Though consumers don't appear to move through the buying cycle in a predictable way, they are engaging with the legal space in ways that can be identified and measured. Undergirding the legal consumer's unpredictable behavior are three major characteristics that, if understood, can help attorneys know where to reach them. Specifically, New Legal Consumers are different from past consumers in that they are more informed, connected, and picky than consumers of the past.

First, consumers have access to more legal information than any consumer before. People are researching their issues online, some before talking to a lawyer and some after they've hired one. They do this so they don't "go in dumb," or so that their attorney doesn't "pull one over" on them. When online, they are reading legal guides and articles as well as statutes and case law, information previously restricted to lawyers and other legal professionals. Given this unprecedented access to information, it is no surprise that 1 in 5 legal consumers believe they can, with enough time and research, harness the knowledge and expertise of a trained lawyer.

The New Legal Consumer is...

Informed

They have access to legal information online

They are:

- *Researching their issue online*
- *Valuing state codes and case law*
- *Reading legal articles*

Connected

They have access to other legal consumers online

They are:

- *Reading others' experiences in online forums and communities*
- *Reading reviews online*

Picky

They have access to diverse legal solutions online

They are:

- *Using online forms*
- *Liking fixed-fee options*
- *Attracted to unbundled services*



1 in 5

*legal consumers believe that, with enough research,
they can know what a lawyer knows.*

Second, the New Legal Consumer is more connected than others before them. They are privy to others' experiences and exposed to others' opinions through online forums like Quora and Reddit. Online reviews are another mechanism of connection, allowing people to read about others' successes and pitfalls, especially as they pertain to the lawyers they hire.

Third, the New Legal Consumer is immersed in a world of options. Today's legal consumer – and in fact, today's consumer in any industry or category – has the luxury of choosing between more products and brands and solutions than any consumer before. Many of these legal solutions are do-it-yourself. Today one can go online to get a divorce or incorporate a business and never talk to an attorney. If help is needed, one can call a legal hotline to talk to a legal professional without having to hire one. Consumers are also exposed to unbundled and fixed-fee services that many find appealing (47% respond positively to hiring an attorney only to review an already-prepared document and 76% like the idea of a fixed-fee service).

Now that we know how the New Legal Consumer is different from consumers of the past, what are they actually doing?

What are New Legal Consumers doing?



They're online

Researching their issue	42%
Researching a lawyer	31%
Completing a form	17%
Visiting a forum	16%

They're getting free help

Getting a free consult	32%
Getting free advice from a lawyer by phone or email	21%
Calling a legal help line	15%



They're talking to friends

Getting referrals	25%
Getting advice from friends or family who aren't lawyers	25%

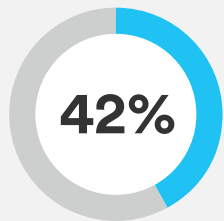
They're hiring

Hiring a lawyer	42%
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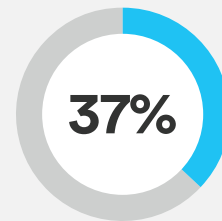
The New Legal Consumer is plugged in

While pre-internet legal consumers would often go directly to a lawyer for guidance and help, New Legal Consumers are more self-directed in solving their legal issues. For many, this involves researching their issues online. Three out of five legal consumers go online at some point to investigate and/or try to resolve their legal issue; 42% of consumers are going online to research their issue specifically. Right now, just as many legal consumers are researching their issues online as are hiring an attorney. Thirty-seven percent look for solutions themselves online as soon as their legal need is triggered, hoping to resolve their entire issue on their own. One in ten research online even after they hire a lawyer. research, harness the knowledge and expertise of a trained lawyer.

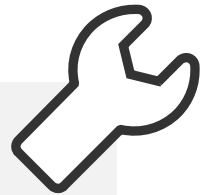
The fact that online resources are being used by so many legal consumers makes clear how important a variety of internet resources are to your client base. Data on general internet usage and trends suggests that this number will only increase.



*of consumers research
their legal issue online*



*try to resolve their
situation themselves once
their issue is triggered*





Most valued online resources

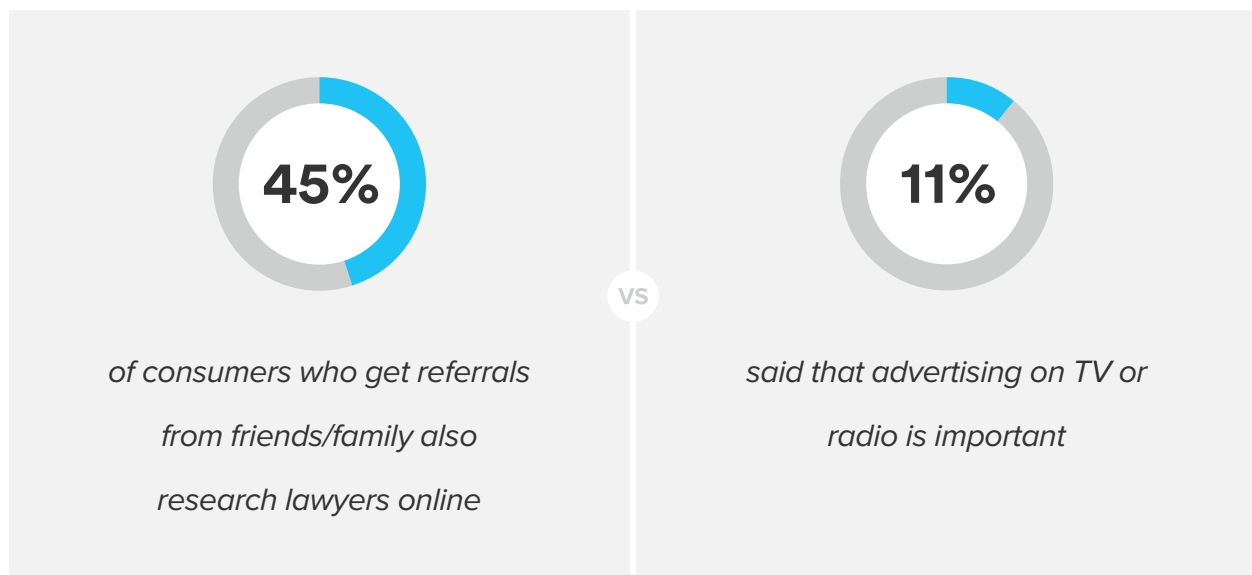
- 1 Site with actual cases, laws, or court decisions
- 2 State or other government site
- 3 Non-government legal resource site
- 4 Online lawyer directory
- 5 General consumer review site
- 6 Forum or community site
- 7 Site with online forms
- 8 Social media site
- 9 Blog(s)

Once online, what is the New Legal Consumer looking for? What do they value? Primarily, they want legal information straight from the source, the way lawyers might. They want to read actual statutes and court opinions, and they prefer visiting official government sites. This desire to understand the law as a lawyer might be aspirational. Many consumers still feel stuck as they struggle both to interpret the law and apply what they read to their unique situation.

Lawyers aren't the government or the writers of statutory law or court opinions, but they are able to provide the next best thing: legal information and guidance as a non-governmental legal resource, which the New Legal Consumer also highly values. Online resources from non-lawyer sites (like Avvo) are also highly valued, especially those with rich content specifically designed to guide the New Legal Consumer as they navigate their way through their legal issue.

The New Legal Consumer is comparing lawyers online

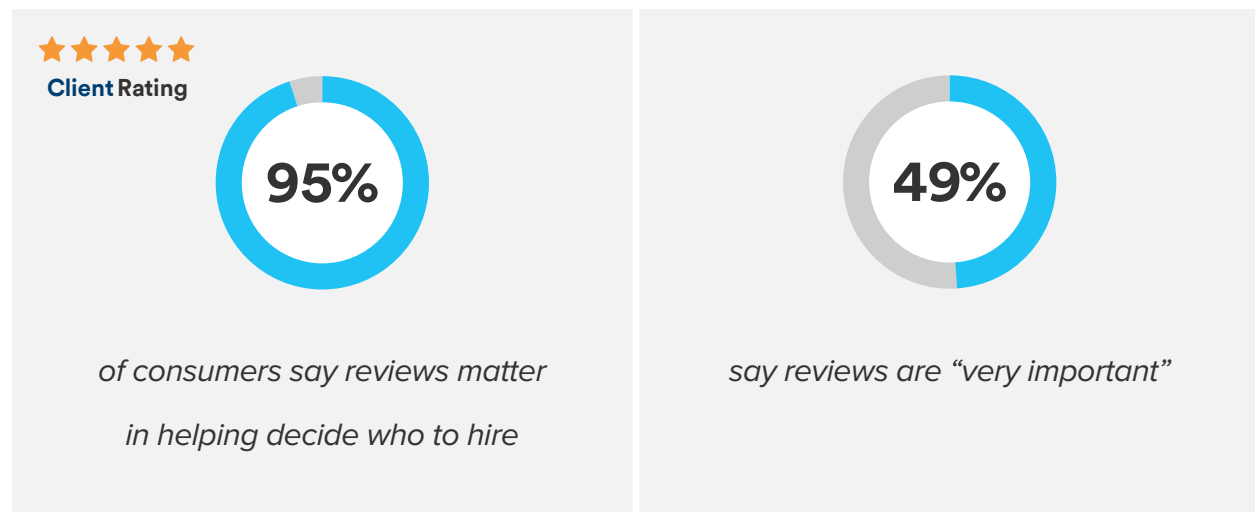
Online research extends beyond just learning about a legal issue. The New Legal Consumer is researching lawyers online as well (31% are doing this). In fact, the New Legal Consumer is more likely to research lawyers online than to seek a referral from a friend or family member. Fifty-three percent of all consumers who go online to resolve their legal issue are also researching lawyers online; 45% of who get a lawyer referral from friends or family also research lawyers online. And while online, they are comparing lawyer credentials, experience, ratings, and reviews.



Gone are the days where awareness-building through TV advertising is necessary to get an edge: When we asked the general population what they care about when looking for a lawyer to hire, only 11% said that advertising on TV or radio is important, while 29% said what matters is that a lawyer appear in a directory. In future years, as more attorneys create their own websites, invest in SEM and SEO, and advertise their services online, we expect more consumers to evaluate lawyers online than are doing so today. As awareness of lawyer directories grows among the general population and those with legal needs (for example, Avvo saw a 250% increase in general population awareness since late 2014), we anticipate more consumers will go online to research lawyers in the coming years. This means that a strong online presence is important for any lawyer who wants to maintain or grow their practice.

They are learning from one another

Almost one in five legal consumers (16%) get legal information from online forums and communities. Consumers visit online forums to hear from people like them, people who have had to face the same challenges and who may have valuable insight regarding the best ways to move forward. “They can give you advice,” one consumer told us, “and tell you why the process did or did not work.” Though people recognize their cases are unique, they tell us that reading about other situations that are similar enough helps them prepare for what to expect and how to proceed. Consumers feel they can get information from other consumers that is more personal than what they can get from a lawyer. Some say they trust the opinions of others more than that of lawyers. Some report visiting forums after the resolution of their issue, to share their lessons so that others don’t experience the same pitfalls.



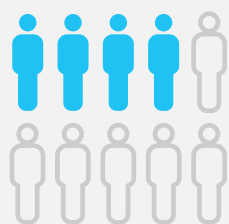
Consumers are also learning from one another through online reviews: 95% of all legal consumers say online reviews matter to some degree in helping them decide who to hire. Half say reviews are very important. Consumers across all retail industries have come to expect reviews in nearly every commercial transaction. Research in ecommerce shopping in grocery and retail reveals that consumers reading reviews look for stories that unfold with rich detail, that make the reader feel like they can relive the experience. They appreciate testimonials that are personal and genuine, even if they are not 100% positive. Participation in reviews – as well as online forums – is a valuable way in which lawyers can engage with the New Legal Consumer, increasing their chances of obtaining leads and referrals.

Lawyers are still incredibly valuable

It is absolutely untrue that lawyers are becoming irrelevant in the age of new consumerism. Lawyers are and will continue to be a critical component of any consumer's search for legal help. Statistics make this clear:

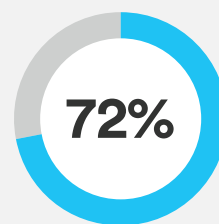
- 42% of all legal consumers hire a lawyer at some point during the course of their legal issue
- 82% of legal consumers who hire lawyers do so early in the lifespan of their legal issue
- 33% of legal consumers who use a website to complete a legal form hire a lawyer, and 39% seek a free consult from one
- 31% of people who visit an online forum or community also hire an attorney

The primary reason why consumers consult with or hire lawyers is because they get stuck. Sixty-six percent of legal consumers feel stuck at some point during the course of their legal issue, and 42% said they felt so stuck that they needed a lawyer. Even consumers that want to do things themselves realize that hiring a lawyer may be the only real solution. Of the 37% of consumers who start out DIY'ing their legal solution, 25% end up hiring an attorney and 32% seek out a lawyer's free advice or consult.



4 in 10

*legal consumers hire a lawyer
to help resolve their issue*



*of legal consumers who
complete a form online also
seek the help of an attorney*

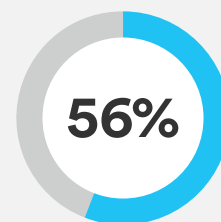
Consumers are looking for you. And they are hiring you. Given that the New Legal Consumer is at least as likely to learn about you online as from a friend or family member, a rich presence online is essential. The true challenge is adapting to their behavior rather than fighting it, so that they will consider you.

Reach consumers where they are, and give them what they're looking for

Online tools that quickly connect people with lawyers are in step with consumer expectations. Engaging with your would-be clients in online conversation is critical. Thirty-six percent of all legal consumers say an online forum is valuable to them but only 16% use them while resolving their legal issue. This means there is opportunity: many people may not believe that online conversations regarding legal situations are as available to them as conversations about other topics. Thus, being part of an online legal forum now means being ahead of the game.

One way to do this is by being available online to respond to queries posed by legal consumers. Fast and direct contact with a lawyer is highly valued: 56% of legal consumers say they value a legal hotline that gets them directly in touch with a lawyer. Bringing this hotline to an online platform is one way to meet two very important consumer needs: online connection and attorney attention. Being available online to answer consumer questions is an important way to reach the New Legal Consumer.

Many attorneys are of the opinion that participation in online forums like this will not generate new business. But in this new era, where seeking information online is increasingly commonplace, avoiding online engagement with those in need could mean missing out on a huge opportunity.

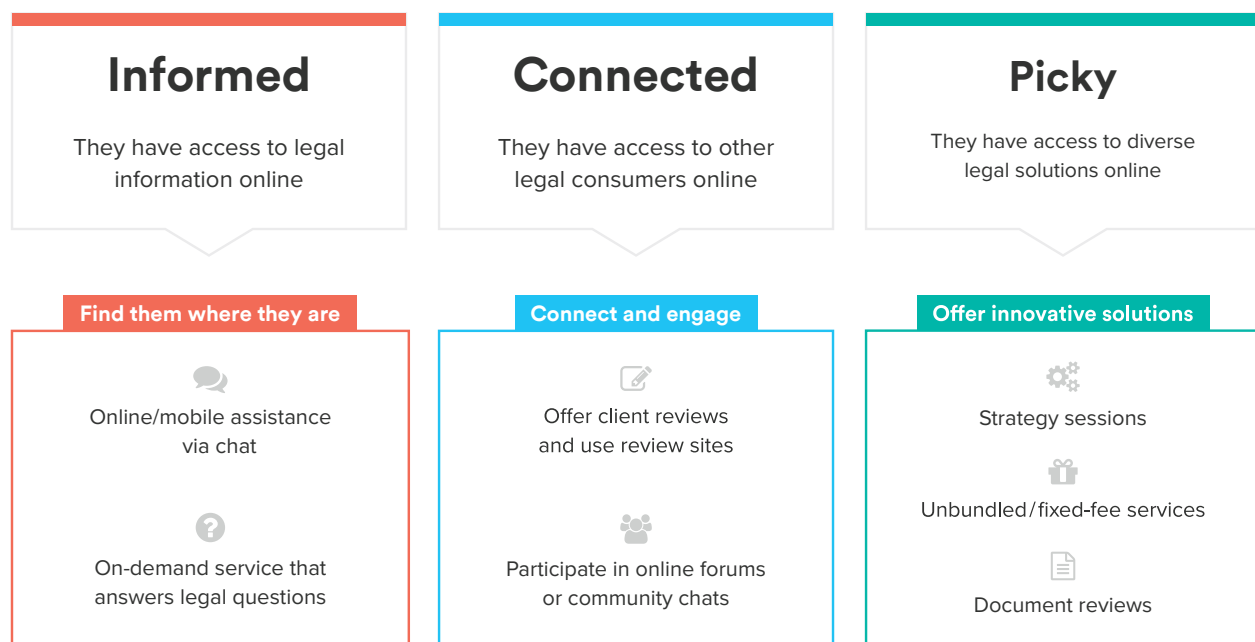


of legal consumers say they value a hotline that connects them directly to a lawyer.



Lawyers must also recognize that the New Legal Consumer can be picky. Online tools and resources expose consumers to do-it-yourself forms, fixed-fee services, unbundled services, and other less traditional legal solutions. So many more solutions are available that it's no wonder the New Legal Consumer is selective. Personalized solutions are becoming easier and easier to find.

How can lawyers adapt? By offering innovative solutions, developing products, services, and experiences that meet the needs and expectations of the New Legal Consumer. For example, now that anyone online has the option of completing legal forms themselves, lawyers could become essential by offering forms as well, or at least offering to review documents that clients prepare. Attorney-led “strategy sessions” could provide clients with in-depth overviews of what to expect during the course of a case, complete with a discussion of relevant risks and pitfalls, while offering tips on how to best navigate a solution. Lawyers can be part of a legal helpline – by phone or online – that allows consumers to check in and make sure they are on the right track – when and where they need the help, as many times as they need it. Offering services at a fixed-fee also satisfies a growing need, as do unbundled services that limit your support to discrete tasks (such as reviewing forms or documents that consumers complete themselves).



Examples of innovation in practice



Forrest Carlson

Estate Planning, Business,
and Internet
Seattle, WA

Adapting to consumers who are:

Informed

Connected

Picky

Adapting to the New Legal Consumer:



Online legal library

- Glossary of common will terms
- Blog of latest Washington wills news



Specialized services

- Free DIY form template
- Guided questionnaire
- Flat-fee form drafting service
- Ongoing support



Ongoing online conversation

- Free Q&A

Impact on practice:

- In six short months, moved from page 22 to page 1 in Google search listings
- Significant and rapid increase in referrals from other attorneys



Julie Tolek

2nd Amendment
Compliance, Estate
Planning, and Family Law
Framingham, MA

Adapting to consumers who are:

Informed

Connected

Picky

Adapting to the New Legal Consumer:



Information-sharing and education

- Email marketing with newsletter
- Blogging, with focus on educating



Heavy presence on social media

- Twitter and Facebook
- Video marketing, some live streaming
- Seeks client reviews



Accessible and flexible

- Flexible scheduling
- Facetime meetings and video conferencing
- Online case management
- Web-based document sharing

Impact on practice:

- Excellent attorney referrals
- High client satisfaction

Examples of innovation in practice



Chad Van Horn

Bankruptcy and Debt
Fort Lauderdale, FL

Adapting to consumers who are:

Connected

Picky

Adapting to the New Legal Consumer:



Services specialized to client

- Flat-fee billing model
- Unbundled services
- Appointments on evenings and weekends, and via Skype



Reaches clients in the social space

- Active on social media platforms
- Embraces client reviews
- Encourages Facebook connections with clients

Impact on practice:

- High-volume practice
- Growth at rapid rate



Greg McLawsen

Immigration
Bellevue, WA

Adapting to consumers who are:

Picky

Adapting to the New Legal Consumer:



Web-based communication and online case management

- 90% of services are offered online
- Skype meetings
- Secure messaging through online communication tool (not email)
- Online self-scheduling tool
- 24/7 case file access with agile online project management
- Direct lawyer contact

Impact on practice:

- National and even global client base, meaning more opportunity for leads and conversions
- Increased efficiency in administrative aspects of practice

Ultimately, 4 in 10 consumers with legal needs hire a lawyer. Many may want alternative solutions to full hire, but many will also realize that hiring an attorney to handle their case is the best solution for them. Your entire practice doesn't need to change. But making one or two adjustments to how you market or reach consumers, or what you offer them, can make a big difference in getting them through your door.

Fight for your clients, not against them

The behavior of the New Legal Consumer is part of a cultural shift that shows no signs of slowing down. Your business cannot survive unless it adapts. Consumers are going to do what they feel they need to do. As lawyers, we turn to our profession for guidance on how to practice law and behave as attorneys. Consumers do not answer to the same guidelines. They are looking for the path of least resistance. Bringing them to your door requires reaching out and greeting them where they are, which is online researching, connecting, and shopping for options. As we do more research, and become increasingly savvy about how the New Legal Consumer behaves, we can continue to adapt to the world in which they struggle. And we can better struggle on behalf of them.

About Avvo

Avvo conducts periodic studies of attitudes, behaviors, and opinions of consumers engaging with attorneys and the legal system, to better understand how they think about and approach obtaining legal help. Given that nearly 60% of consumers dealing with a legal issue forego hiring a lawyer, learning and anticipating the steps and considerations involved in seeking legal counsel is beneficial to both the legal consumers and attorneys Avvo serves.

About the research

Data used in this report came from a 2015 Avvo study of legal consumers. This study combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to understand and measure a variety of attitudes and behaviors that legal consumers engage in. Approximately 90 focus group participants were interviewed in three major cities in the qualitative phase (New York, Houston, and Seattle). For the quantitative portion, 899 legal consumers – people with legal issues in the past two years across all practice areas – were surveyed. Participants in both parts of the study were recruited from the general population; though some were Avvo users, most were not.