
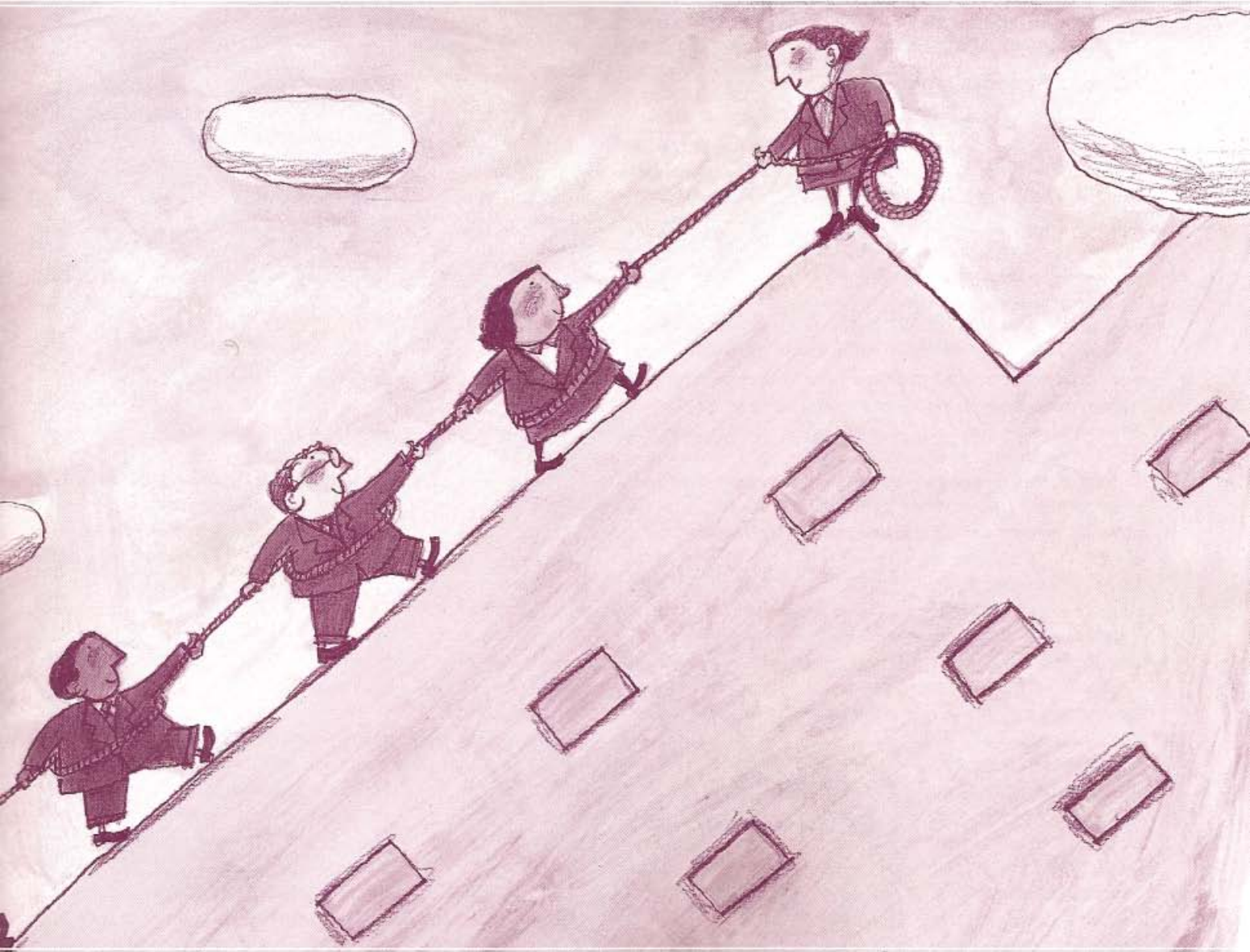


# BarLeader

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From the American Bar Association

for the leaders of bar associations 



## Who needs help?

BARS AND LAWYER ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS  
FIGHT STIGMAS AND LEND A HAND

# Online lawyer search: A look at two new sites

In today's do-it-yourself, information-hungry climate, perhaps it was inevitable that someone looked into online lawyer search and decided there needed to be more of a consumer focus.

But the arrival of two new services, one from within the bar world and the other from outside it, is raising questions in some quarters. Some wonder about the quality of the information being presented, and others ask whether existing lawyer referral services will be imperiled by this new model.

Liam ([www.liamlaw.com](http://www.liamlaw.com)), a new site developed by the Columbus (Ohio) Bar Association, takes those concerns into account, and is meant as a complement to the CBA's LRS, says Anne Leonard-Palmer, project manager for Liam.

CBA leaders believe there is a segment of the population that is not being served by traditional lawyer referral services, Leonard-Palmer says. Liam is aimed at that portion of the public that prefers to conduct business

on the Internet, may be reluctant to speak with a person about their issues, and may need to conduct business outside of LRS business hours.

"That demographic was probably not using our lawyer referral before, so now we've expanded the reach of the consumers we can help," Leonard-Palmer says.

Lawyers who register with Liam, which went live in May and is restricted to CBA members, pay \$150 a month to have their information appear in search results for two particular areas of law. Their profiles include a photo, contact information, areas of practice, and background information on the lawyer, which the lawyer provides.

The background statement is often very personally worded and includes details meant to spark a connection or put potential clients at ease, such as mention of the lawyer's family, or hobbies and interests. Sometimes, there are also family photos or photos of the lawyer's pets.

While it is noted on the Liam site that the service is sponsored by the CBA, Leonard-Palmer says the bar intentionally worked at creating a separate identity for Liam. During site development, CBA leaders evaluated more than 100 commercial and bar association Web sites from the perspective of "How would a consumer with a legal need view this Web site? Would they find it easy to immediately find legal help, or would anything about the site confuse them or take them in a different direction?"

Because bar association Web sites generally serve two audiences—members and the public—the CBA decided it was best to concentrate only on the consumer side. Most sites the CBA visited were either cluttered with outside advertising or full of member content

directly alongside consumer content, Leonard-Palmer says, so it was decided that Liam should focus on delivering consumer information in a much cleaner and simpler format.

"We invested a good amount of time and design decisions on Liam's look and feel so that consumers would immediately understand the site to be consumer-directed and consumer-friendly, and yet still brought to them by the Columbus Bar Association," she notes.

The CBA is very much committed to maintaining its LRS, says Marion Smithberger, the bar's director of LRS. In addition to those consumers who simply prefer to use the LRS rather than Liam, some will likely end up using both, he notes, because LRS offers help by telephone, while Liam is online only. "LRS is the voice of Liam. If someone uses Liam and still has a question, there's someone they can talk to," Smithberger says. "It's the best of both worlds."

## Another model: Avvo

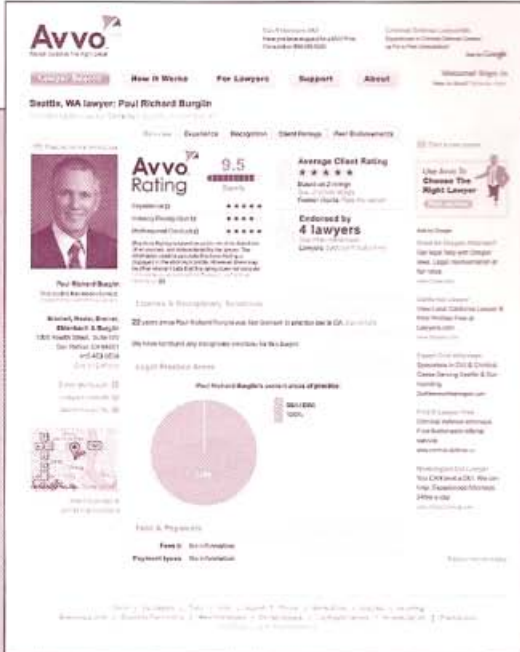
Avvo Corp. is a non-bar-affiliated company that also saw a population that it believes was not being served by traditional LRS. Unlike the CBA's Liam, Avvo is not meant as a complement to an existing LRS. CEO and President Mark Britton says that Avvo came into being after extensive consumer research showed that many people wanted to be able to learn about lawyers from an independent source, much in the way they use sites such as Amazon to get reviews of books.

"It's an incredibly important decision, yet most people have no idea how to go about it," Britton says.

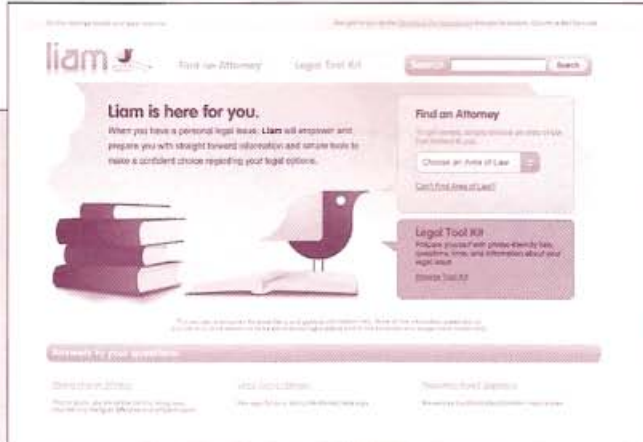
He notes that Yellow Pages figures show that there were 311 million lookups for lawyers in 2006, both online and offline. "If people are start-



Mark Britton: "Choosing a lawyer is an incredibly important decision, yet most people have no idea how to go about it."



Courtesy of Avvo Corp.



Courtesy of the Columbus Bar Association.

*Both Avvo and Liam seem to take a note from consumer-oriented Web sites rather than from law firm or bar association ones. Noticeably absent are scales, Lady Justice, or similar motifs.*

ing [their search for an attorney] at the Yellow Pages, there's not a lot of information or realistic guidance in that. We're trying to deliver more information and more guidance, so that consumers have a better place to start."

Avvo offers site visitors a guide on how to choose a lawyer, including assembling a pool of candidates, talking with them, getting recommendations, and then selecting one to work with.

The service also features areas for feedback on lawyers, both from their colleagues and from clients. Avvo requires clients to register with the service before they can post comments about their lawyers.

The site, which went live in June, allows consumers in the states it serves (nine as of press time, plus the District of Columbia) to find lawyers in a given practice area who are located in a given geographical area. Site visitors get contact and background information about each lawyer, as well as an "Avvo Rating," a numerical score on a scale from one to 10, which translates into ratings such as "Excellent," "Good," or "Extreme Caution."

The site and, in particular, the ratings, have been a source of controversy and concern to some, including lawyers who have filed a class action suit against Avvo. The lawyers allege, among other things, that Avvo's rating system is not accurate in its represen-

tation of some lawyers' records, and even has positive ratings for lawyers who have been disbarred.

Avvo's ratings come from compiling as much public information as possible about a lawyer, including disciplinary records, and then using a "mathematical model" to determine a numerical rating, Britton says. Lawyers who have questions or problems with their profiles are able to amend them, which may result in an improved rating, Britton notes.

Members of the public are not charged to use Avvo or Liam. Lawyers are also not charged to appear on Avvo. The company plans to make money by eventually allowing lawyers to advertise on the site, Britton says.

### Why preserve LRS?

Another area of concern for many is whether consumer-oriented lawyer search sites will begin to replace traditional lawyer referral services. The CBA is widely respected in LRS circles, and those who express concern with Liam are often quick to note that their worry is really about what might happen if other bar associations that are less focused on LRS begin to emulate this model.

For example, Janet Diaz, executive director of the Houston Lawyer Referral Service, commends the CBA's commitment to keeping LRS strong

but is concerned that other bars, looking at the issue from an economic perspective, may find it more attractive to focus on using a consumer-focused Web site for lawyer search than to invest in the hiring and training of LRS staff.

And why would that be a problem? She believes that many people who would contact either an LRS or an online service may not know if they really need a lawyer, or in what specific area of law. While a trained LRS staffer can help callers determine exactly what their needs are, visitors to a Web site don't always get that extra help, she says.

"We receive 125,000 calls per year. That's a phenomenal number of calls from individuals who are seeking some type of assistance. Only 25,000 of those become actual attorney referrals," Diaz says. "So, 100,000 people who contact us each year really do not need the services of an attorney." Her staff can guide callers to appropriate resources, which she says means "the traditional business model [for lawyer referral services] offers something that these others cannot."

Diaz is not opposed to having an online component to LRS; her program has featured online referral applications for several years at [www.hlsr.org/intus/referral/getarreferral.asp](http://www.hlsr.org/intus/referral/getarreferral.asp), and the online feature is

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## Online lawyer search

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backed up by the staff, who are available by phone during normal business hours.

Her concern with consumer-driven sites is their “open directories,” where visitors can, in effect, shop for lawyers from listings after inputting only minimal information or clicking on a geographic area or area of practice, rather than being guided toward a match by a trained staff person. This model, in the hands of a bar or company that doesn’t see the purpose of LRS, could lead to the demise of traditional referral services, Diaz says.

Most lawyer referral services charge attorneys a fee to be listed, and then charge a percentage of the fee the attorney eventually collects from the client. If users of an online service are not required to enter their personal information, there is no way for the service to know which lawyer they hired, and therefore no way to collect the percentage of the fee.

“Most bar associations will tell you

that the number one point of contact with the general public is through their lawyer referral program,” Diaz says, noting that public service, including via LRS, should remain an important part of the mission of the bar.

But others in the legal services realm question whether LRS is really in peril. “Competition is not a bad thing,” says Will Hornsby, staff counsel for the ABA Standing Committee on the Delivery of Legal Services. “The lawyer referral community has spent a lot of time and energy in successfully branding its ‘product’ as something the public can and should have trust in. Any competing mechanism is going to have to confront that brand.”

Some have other concerns about the new online services. Lawyers who are members of an ABA-certified LRS are screened to ensure they have experience in the areas in which they are being referred, says Ron Abernethy, chair of the ABA Standing Committee on Lawyer Referral and Information Service. In an online service where the lawyer provides the content, “You can say whatever you want. There is no

way for the consumer to know for sure.” Abernethy also questions the “consumer choice” driver for non-LRS Web sites; after all, he says, LRS users, too, have the choice of whether or not to hire a particular lawyer.

For its part, the CBA aims to prevent inaccuracies and other problems via a number of entry requirements. Participating in Liam requires, among other things, being a CBA member in good standing with the Ohio Supreme Court, carrying a specified amount of professional liability insurance, being approved by the bar’s board, and adhering to nine “Commitments to Clients.” To see all the requirements, visit [www.liamlaw.com/standards/](http://www.liamlaw.com/standards/).

Whether from a bar association or a corporation, it remains to be seen if lawyer search sites are the wave of the future. The question of whether the services will survive will depend on how accurate their perception is of a latent marketplace for legal services, and how effectively they can reach that market, Hornsby notes.

—By Dan Kittay