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## Step by step: How to hire a lawyer

There are many ways to research candidates to be your attorney, and there are many questions to ask

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February 8, 2010 | By Susan Jacobson, Orlando Sentinel, Sentinel Staff Writer

You're getting divorced. You need to make a will. [Your home](#) is in foreclosure.

Where do you go for help?

To a lawyer, of course.

But with 87,000 of the legal eagles in Florida, how does a consumer choose?

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For laypeople, [options](#) can be overwhelming. A good place to start is the Florida Bar Association's Web site ([flabar.org](http://flabar.org)).

First, when should you consider consulting a lawyer? According to the Bar:

- When you buy or sell property.
- Before you sign a contract with major [financial](#) implications.
- If you're preparing a will or updating an old one.
- If you are arrested or charged with a crime.
- When you are involved in an accident that seriously injures people or damages property significantly.
- When you marry or divorce or adopt a child.
- If you have tax questions.
- When you are sued or want to sue someone.

OK, so how do you go about finding the right person to represent you? Word of mouth, several Central Florida lawyers said.

"It's kind of like choosing a doctor," said Steven Kramer, president of the Seminole County Bar Association. "Your best bet is your gut. I want to look in his eyes, [shake](#) his hand, meet his staff. Anybody can look good on paper."

Go local, advises Damon Chase, president-elect of the Seminole County Bar Association and president of the Florida Council of Bar Association Presidents. It will save time and [money](#), and it could affect the outcome of your case.

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"They will be more familiar with local rules and procedures, the courthouse and the judges," Chase said.

Attorneys suggest that prospective clients interview two or three lawyers before settling on one. Other tips: Pay attention to how you are treated by the attorneys and their staff. Do they speak to you with respect? Are you on the same wavelength? Do you understand how you will be billed, and how much?

"The main thing is sitting down with that person and feeling comfortable," said Frank Bedell, president-elect of the Orange County Bar Association.

Only a few years ago, the first step for many people was the phone book. Now, many consumers let their fingers do their walking on the computer keyboard.

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The Florida Bar's site has a complete list of members and also maintains a list of discipline records. Many lawyers have their own Web sites, too.

Clients (and former clients) are also free to post their kudos and gripes.

"Online is really the way to go nowadays, because you can get a lot of information about people online: 'I hated my lawyer; I love my lawyer.'" said Eve D'Lugo, immediate past president of the Osceola County Bar Association.


Just be careful to separate online self-promotion from fact, said Diego "Woody" Rodriguez, president of the Orange County Bar Association.

Although some general attorneys may be able to tackle any legal concern, Kissimmee criminal-defense attorney Steven R. Tinsley advises consumers to choose a lawyer who specializes in whatever problem they're having. The timetable and emotional heat of a divorce can be very different from a bankruptcy or a DUI.


One way to find a specialist is through a lawyer you may have previously dealt with but one who handles a different area of the law.

Time permitting, people can attend court hearings to see how lawyers sound and behave. It wouldn't hurt to ask someone who spends a lot of the time in the courtroom, such as a court deputy or clerk, for insights on which lawyers tend to be effective — though they are unlikely to make an outright recommendation, lawyers said.

Then, listen carefully to what the attorney tells you. Ask him or her about the stakes of your case and what could happen if things don't go your way.

"Beware of somebody who says they can guarantee results," Tinsley said. "You don't know if you've got a good [car](#)  salesman or somebody who can actually deliver the goods."

If English is not your first language, you may want to consider a bilingual lawyer. It's crucial for you to be able to communicate easily, said Rodriguez, who speaks Spanish and English.

A staff paralegal, for example, could provide acceptable translation services. However, prospective clients should avoid an office where they don't understand [communications](#)  or feel they are not understood, he advises.

If you still can't find someone to represent you, try the Orange County Bar Association's lawyer-referral service (407-422-4537), which matches prospective clients to attorneys with expertise in their area of concern. Prepaid legal service plans, sometimes available through your job or another group you belong to, are another option. Clubs or special-interest groups also may have a list of preferred lawyers.


The Florida Bar has its own statewide referral service at 1-800-342-8011.

Several top lawyers agreed that board certification is a plus. The lawyer must be an active member of the Bar in good standing, pass a written exam in the specialty area, be evaluated favorably by judges and other lawyers and have good character, ethics and a reputation for professionalism.

That tends to lead to higher competence, some attorneys said.

"You are really safe with that," said Chase, who doesn't think lawyer-referral services are effective.

For low-income resident, there's the Legal Aid Society, 407-841-8310. (See [legalaidocba.org](http://legalaidocba.org) for a list of types of cases the society handles.)

The Orange County Bar Association's Modest Means Program provides reduced-cost bankruptcy, family-law, landlord-tenant and will services. (See [orangecountybar.org/modestmeans.asp](http://orangecountybar.org/modestmeans.asp) for [income](#)  qualifications.)

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