

News

Solicitor firms – affordable, value-for-money services?

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Anna Bradley, Chair of the SRA Board

We've all seen the research that shows most people don't use the services of a solicitor when they have a legal problem - around nine out of ten ask friends for help, try to resolve the issue themselves, or don't do anything at all. So, why?

Consumers say they expect solicitors will be too expensive and information about the services of law firms will be too hard to find. In these days of easy access online information for everything else, it's not surprising that that's a deterrent.

As using a solicitor is often associated with major life events - buying a house, settling the estate of a loved one, perhaps getting divorced, consumers are likely already to be anxious or even worried. Which makes it all the more important that it is easy to find the information they need about price and quality at difficult times.

Firms have had to publish prices and details for some common services since our new rules came in at the end of 2018. Independent research showed this is already making a difference – for example people said they found that solicitor firms were less costly than they expected, and that many firms are publishing far more than required because they know it's good for business. All the more so at the moment.

We know not all firms are publishing the required information and we are actively checking to make sure all consumers get the benefit of price information. So if your firm is not yet compliant, you need to catch up fast.

But price information is only the beginning of this journey. What people also tell us they want to know about is quality, and that is a much tougher question.

Traditionally 'word of mouth' recommendations or personal referrals have played a key role in helping firms win new business, and of course they always will. But these days we are all used to looking online and comparing providers, whether it's for a holiday (remember those?), buying insurance, using private healthcare or even placing that all important grocery order. So how can we make this type of comparison work in our sector? If we could get this right it would not only help potential clients, but also help good firms to attract new business.

To start to answer this question, we are launching a pilot – in partnership with the Council for Licensed Conveyancers and CILEx Regulation. We are looking at what the genuine indicators of quality in legal services are, and how to make this information available to support service comparisons.

I'm pretty sure that comparative information has to include service reviews. After all, we all take online reviews for granted in other sectors; routinely checking things like the star rating of an electricity or broadband service provider. So why not for a solicitor advising on a home move? Giving clients the opportunity to feed back their views and say to others that the firm they used is worth their custom is the closest digital equivalent of 'word of mouth'.

We think this kind of information could be delivered on screen, either on law firms' own websites or through comparison sites. So for the first part of our pilot we are bringing together comparison website providers and law firms to help them develop ideas for the future. Of course, there are different types of comparison websites; some are free, and some have a cost attached, so we will be working with both.

We will be working with the public too, to make sure the ideas we trial are firmly rooted in what works for them. We're focusing on conveyancing and employment law to begin with, and I'm pleased to say there is still time to get involved. See our website – of course! – for details.

This is the right initiative for the right time. Access to comparative information and the use of technology have both been hotly debated in this sector for years now. The results of our research on price disclosure show consumers find this information very helpful, but it is not enough, and the pandemic has changed the landscape, making digital essential. There is now a great opportunity to give the public better access to the information they need about services and so help law firms thrive. Quality is the next step on the journey, so as well as asking you to watch this space, I encourage you to give some thought to how you could use this initiative to help you and your firm attract new business.