

The ins and outs of hiring a personal injury attorney

By Jeremy Johnston

Let's start off by defining "personal injury". This phrase generally means tort lawsuits or out of court claims for physical or mental injury to a person. The most common types of personal injury claims are road traffic collisions, work accidents, trip and falls, assault claims, accidents in the home, and product liability claims. The term also incorporates medical and dental malpractice (which lead to numerous medical negligence claims every year) and conditions that are often classified as *industrial disease* cases, including but not limited to asbestosis and mesothelioma, chest diseases, and occupational stress injury cases.

Here's a few do's and don'ts for hiring a personal injury attorney:

Don't go by advertising alone. Just because attorneys can afford a television commercial or billboard advertising does not make them the best person for the job.

Do be careful about ads that tout too many different specialties. No one can be good at everything.

Don't make a hasty decision. Take your time in choosing the right attorney for you and your case. It will be worth it in the long run.

Do realize that ambulance chasers really exist. Their M.O. is to take on many minor personal injury cases and settle them quickly. Their profit comes from how fast they churn out settlements; therefore they may not put much time and effort into their cases.

Which leads us to...

Do be wary if you receive an unsolicited request from an attorney seeking to represent you.

...and...

Do research several different attorneys before choosing one.

But how do you research? There are many different ways.

Ask for referrals from an attorney you know, or people you know that may have had claims similar to yours.

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Visit your state bar association online. You can ensure that the attorney is certified and if they are in good standing with the association.

When interviewing an attorney, ask questions.

Where did he or she go to law school? How many years of experience? Does he or she have experience representing the type of claim that you have? How successful has the attorney been at recovering damages for their clients?

Of course you should go with an attorney with a proven success rate. The more information you receive about your potential personal injury lawyer, the more likely you will be able to choose someone who can help you recover the money for which you are entitled.

Have they achieved any significant verdicts or settlements for their clients? You'd be surprised how many lawyers working in the personal injury field have tried very few cases. Why? They settle their cases and those that cannot be settled are farmed out to other lawyers who actually try them. It's better to have your case in the hands of a trial lawyer from outset.

So, another good question to ask: Do they have courtroom experience? Not all cases can be settled out of court. If your attorney has to go to court, you want to make sure he or she has successful litigation experience.

Ask them if they belong to any professional organizations like their state's Trial Lawyer's Association and/or the American Association for Justice. These organizations provide education and networking for trial lawyers. Belonging to professional organizations such as these may be indicative of a commitment to promoting fair and effective justice.

Get a clear idea of what the attorney will charge for your type of claim. Most personal injury lawyers work on a contingent fee basis, which means, they don't receive payment for their services unless they recover money for you in settlement or court proceedings. This will be a percentage of the amount he or she recovers for you. Find out what percentage of your recovery the attorney will take and receive the terms of your fee arrangement in writing. Look at any potential attorney's website. These usually show their qualifications, backgrounds, awards, verdicts, and successes.

Ask each attorney to whom you speak, who else handles your type of cases in your area. They should be willing to do this. If they're not, be wary. If they do, the names given will probably be good recommendations for your type of case. Also, be aware of the names that come up most often.

You'll also want to take into consideration the attorney's personality and legal philosophy, and make sure you are able to talk to them. You'll be placing a lot of trust in his or her character and ability. It's important to choose an attorney with whom you feel comfortable. You should also be sure that you will be able to keep in touch with your attorney to obtain answers to your questions and to stay updated on your case.

Compare all of the information you've compiled about potential attorneys so you can select the one who not only has the most experience handling your type of claim, but the one who will work with you to help you receive fair compensation for your injury.

If you do your research, you'll find that Messina Bulzomi Christensen has nationally recognized expertise in complex trials and negotiations. MBC is acknowledged by colleagues as among the best personal injury law firms in the state of Washington. We have a high rating on Martindale-Hubbard, and are in good standing with the Washington State Bar Association. We are persistent, with a proven track record of handling large, complex, difficult cases that result in multimillion dollar settlements or verdicts.

So if you ever find yourself in need of a personal injury attorney do your research and consider MBC.