

Understanding Lawyer Fees



Money isn't everything when it comes to getting good legal advice, but it certainly matters.

One of the biggest sources of misunderstanding between lawyers and clients is the matter of the fee. This article gives some tips on what to look for in lawyers' fees -- and how to avoid disputes about them.

If you are in the process of hiring a lawyer, you can use this information to help buy legal services at a fair price. If you have already hired an attorney, you can evaluate whether or not you have been overcharged.

In essence, you want a lawyer who knows the subject matter of your legal problem inside and out, charges fairly, treats you with respect, and with whom you can communicate. Allowing for the fact that no lawyer is cheap, you probably can find lawyers who fit this description all over the price spectrum.

Here are some general rules to keep in mind:

There is no such thing as a "standard fee." Fee agreements are negotiable between clients and attorneys with some exceptions for when they are limited by law. Fees are based on several factors, including the lawyer's overhead and reputation, expertise, type of legal problem, and what other lawyers in the area charge for similar work.

Occasionally, there may be a "going rate" that most lawyers in a particular locality charge for a certain type of job, such as doing a trademark search, handling an eviction, or preparing a living trust. But even when most lawyers charge about the same for doing a defined legal task, you'll have no problem finding lawyers who charge more and can also probably find one who charges less. You may want to interview several attorneys. You have to be comfortable with the attorney, staff and location of the office. Remember that costs are charged as well. An attorney will provide you with an estimate as to the costs.

Cheap isn't necessarily a good thing. Although everyone wants to save money, the cheapest lawyer is not necessarily the best, especially if your problem is complicated or specialized. A novice who charges \$190.00 an hour may end up costing more than an expert who charges \$350.00 an hour if the more expensive lawyer has much greater expertise and experience and provides better and more efficient service. A seasoned attorney has insight as to what would be involved if you pursued the issue including the time, expense and costs. An experienced practitioner can also provide valuable information regarding the local procedures to be followed and information regarding the local judiciary. If the case calls for a seasoned practitioner, the cheapest fee could lead to an expensive disaster.

Expensive isn't necessarily best, either. That said little correlation exists between a premium price and excellent lawyering. More often, the most expensive lawyers are selling you the image that comes with a posh address, a thick carpet, a great view and bad parking. You probably don't need a "downtown" attorney because there are local, experienced and competent attorneys everywhere.