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Business

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July 15, 2006, 8:20PM

ELDER LAW

A mix of personal and professional experience inspires a lawyer to offer a wide range of services catering to senior citizens

Tapping into an aging and vital market

By MASON LERNER For The Chronicle

Christina Lesher has expanded her law firm in the last two years from one case to several hundred by tapping into her seven years of experience as a social worker and her natural savvy for marketing.

Lesher's firm specializes in elder law and offers an umbrella of services catering to seniors who need help for such things as qualifying for Medicaid and guardianship planning.

She said the elderly are often left to their own devices when trying to wade through the complex minutiae of the laws concerning elder care.

"The rules are just so incredibly complicated that the average person just can't do it on their own," she said. "I know from personal experience how complicated the rules are."

Before attending law school at the University of Houston, Lesher worked seven years as a licensed social worker at a law firm specializing in elder law.



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"My boss told me that I had the personality of a lawyer, not a social worker," she said. "At the time, I thought it was a compliment."

While she was in law school, she faced the extra challenge of helping care for her grandfather, who suffered from dementia.

She said that she thinks this mix of professional and personal experience has helped her expand her practice quickly. And she added that it doesn't hurt that people are living longer than ever.

"The senior population is just booming, and I can relate to their needs," she said. "To go through all of the decisions, like how to find the right care, how to pay for medication — it can be overwhelming."

Using the Internet

What makes Leshar stand out is that all of her marketing is done on the Internet. Some might not think the Internet would be the best way to reach the elderly, but Leshar is proving them wrong.

The trick, she says, is to market to the children of her potential clients. By recognizing the demographic that is directly assuming the responsibility of caring for their elderly parents, she has hit on something that she thinks could be a bonanza.

"From my experience, in this particular field, people don't want to choose their attorney from the yellow pages," she said. "And there are not that many of us out there.

"The people I am trying to reach are professionals, and they are working during the day, so I wanted to develop a way for them to find me during the time that they have to research when they are at home in the evening," she added.

Leshar spends \$2,400 a month promoting her Web site, which includes information about elder law that potential clients can browse before they ever meet her.

It also links to other sites that provide services for the elderly.

Forging an alliance

Leshar has also formed a relationship with Sundance Care Specialists, a small business designed to help the elderly make informed decisions about their health care and assisted living and other services. Its office is down the hall from Leshar's, and the two businesses feed off of one another's clientele.

Doug Reuschel, the owner of Sundance Care Specialists, opened his doors just one year ago, but he has been in the industry for 20 years. He has worked as the manager of an assisted-living community and an administrator at nursing homes.

Like Leshar, he says that after so many years of working with elderly and special-needs clients, it is second nature for him to navigate the system.

"We work together so that if a person needs services or information, they can come here and in one stop they can get their questions answered in regard to their legal affairs, financial planning as well as for health care, finding the right physician, finding assisted

"Before I met Jillia



*Results Not Typical



JILLIAN
MICHAEL

living," Reuschel said.

Two birds with one stone

John Frank, an independent Internet marketing consultant operating in Houston, was initially skeptical about the ability of the Internet to reach the elderly, but he applauded the ingenuity of focusing on their children.

He also explained that the Internet was a great way for Leshar to focus on her current clients while minimizing the effort needed to attract new one.

"Marketing to the children is absolutely the right move, and it is an interesting insight," he said. "The children of the elderly are the people that often assist or take over their parents' affairs when they reach a certain age. Plus, the wonderful thing about Internet advertising is that it empowers business owners with the ability to do a lot of the legwork that was traditionally handled by advertising agencies."

He also noted that by targeting children, Leshar could be killing two birds with one stone in a way that should allow her business to grow more as time passes.

"By establishing a brand identity with middle-aged consumers now, she is setting herself in a favorable position with the same demographic when they reach retirement age," he said.

At this point, Leshar said roughly half of her cases come from people who find her on the Web. The rest come from referrals, and even a lot of those referrals come from attorneys who stumbled upon her site.

"As an entrepreneur and a small-business owner, I can say that my very first case came from somebody who found me on the Web," she said. "It was really instrumental in keeping our doors open because when I was taking care of business, it did the marketing for me."

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