



Choosing a Lawyer

by John D. Whitaker

Picking a lawyer is like picking a doctor. If you have a broken knee, you don't go to a heart surgeon, you call an orthopedic surgeon. If you are looking for a lawyer to read a real estate contract, you don't go to a lawyer who practices primarily criminal law.

Many people use the phone book yellow pages to find a lawyer. The problem with this process is that there are a lot of lawyers listed and it is difficult to judge the capability of a lawyer by reading an ad in the phone book. Referrals from friends or neighbors also are common ways to get the name of a good lawyer, but it depends on the nature of your case. If someone recommends a specific lawyer to you, you should talk to them and briefly describe your case. You should be prepared to tell the lawyer about anyone that might be involved in the case so that any conflict of interest can be disclosed before you get into the details. It is not bad form to ask them if they have experience in the type of case you have.

Some people have a family lawyer, and this is an excellent resource because they will be familiar with other lawyers in the area. If your case is outside the area of practice of your family lawyer, then he or she can point you to a lawyer who practices the kind of law you need. Frankly, most of our clients are referrals from other lawyers.

There are two well-known, peer-reviewed attorney rating services that can be used to select a lawyer. These ratings are published online and you can get a pretty good idea if the lawyer you are considering is thought to be competent and ethical by the other members of the bar. These ratings are based upon confidential surveys of other lawyers and judges in the state, and the ratings are based on experience.

The first rating service is Martindale Hubble. You can look up the lawyer you are considering and obtain his Mar-



tindale Hubble rating. Martindale Hubble rates lawyers on ability and ethical standards. The lawyer's legal ability ratings start with a "C"-rating which means that the lawyer is considered to be "Good to High." This rating is frequently used for younger lawyers. If the lawyer has a "B"-rating, he or she is considered to be "high to very high." An "A"-rating is the highest rating a lawyer can get and is considered "Very High to Preeminent." If the lawyer also has a "V"-rating, this would mean that the lawyer is considered to be highly ethical, diligent and the other lawyers in

the area believe that the lawyer meets the ethical standards required of a competent lawyer. You can look up your lawyer at martindale.com, which is the Web site for Martindale Hubble law directory.

A second rating service includes only those lawyers who are nominated for membership in "Best Lawyers in America." Admission to the Best Lawyers in America is based upon a rigorous peer-review survey comprising more than 2 million of the top attorneys in the country. A lawyer must be nominated for inclusion by other lawyers who practice the same specialty. You can see if the lawyer you are considering hiring is listed in "Best Lawyers in America" by going to BestLawyers.com and searching for the area of law and location. The Wyoming Bar does not certify anyone as a specialist or expert, and it is important to do your own investigation into the capability of any lawyer you are considering.

Finally, and most importantly, you should sit down face to face with any lawyers you are considering. Ask them how many cases they have handled which are similar to the case you have. If you have a specific problem, you can tell pretty quickly if the lawyer you are talking to knows what he or she is talking about. If the lawyer you are considering is not capable of inspiring your confidence in that first meeting, then he or she is probably not the right lawyer for you.

The Wyoming State Bar does not certify any lawyer as a specialist or expert. Anyone considering a lawyer should independently investigate the lawyer's credentials and ability, and not rely upon advertisements or self-proclaimed expertise. This informative column is brought to you by John Whitaker who practices personal injury and criminal law throughout Wyoming. He can be reached at jw@wyoinjury.com or by calling his office in Casper at 265-6204.