

# Popular Threads on Solosez

## Location, Location, Location

My question tonight in my on-going effort to research how to start a solo practice is, how do you decide where to locate your office? I live in small suburb tucked comfortably between Dallas and Forth Worth. My wife likes Fort Worth; I'm partial to Dallas. There's a lot more people in and around Dallas, but there are also a lot of attorneys in Dallas. And for either city, should I locate my practice in the city, or in a suburb? Or does it matter? In fact, how much does any of it matter, so long as you're not (for example) putting your civil litigation practice next to a bail bondsman and a strip club?

I guess what I'm really asking is, what factors are important in deciding where you want to locate your practice?

Thanks in advance for the tips.

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I hate to answer a question with a question, but in this case, I don't know enough about you or your practice to guess...

Your future clients, where are they going to look for a lawyer? Where are they going to expect to meet their lawyer?

Start with the clients. Get a good mental picture of what your ideal client looks like. Your ideal client is the person you work best with. In other words, it's a personality description, not a demographic one. Whatever your practice area, there are all sorts of different personalities that need those kinds of services. So, don't focus on need. Focus on the kind of person you hope to have sitting across from you for the next 15-20 years. Now that you have that person in mind, ask yourself what that person is going to expect in a lawyer.

The next step is simply to be that lawyer. Put your office where your ideal client would expect it to be. Of course, it needs to be accessible to your target market (i.e. demographic), but it doesn't need to be smack-dab in the middle, either. If you are the right lawyer for them, they'll come to you.

I know that sounds like a non-answer, but that's because your question is like the ones that clients ask all the time... The answer is "it depends."

Cheers,

David Hiersekorn, California

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What are your specific reasons for preferring Dallas? You live in Tarrant County and will likely get referrals from friends, neighbors, your kid's soccer coach, etc., likely all T Cty cases. Also, the commute looks a little better to Weatherford Street than to the George Allen or Crowley courthouses.

Visit with local counsel in both places - the general atmosphere, clerks and judges may make a difference to you. The type of law you practice will determine your judge/clerk pool, so consider that.

I chose to have my office in my small town, close to my home. I travel to and from my office far more often than I do to court, so having my office located here means I can work as early or late as I want, and the drive time is never a factor. Even so, there is something to be said for those (more expensive) offices around the

courthouse square - easy to pop over to file a motion or retire back to the office and get something done during the noon recess. In a couple of years I would like to do more work in Collin County, but I believe I will need an office in McKinney for that to be successful ~ maybe an office-share.

I don't see Tarrant County PC's heading to Dallas to retain a lawyer for their TCty cases or vice versa, but there's always exceptions - I've had clients who lived in Dallas and now three from Oklahoma.

Toni Warder, Texas

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Think about parking for your clients. Will your clients prefer to not deal with driving to a city's downtown?

Ellen Buckley

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OK, I mentioned this a few days ago, and if you search the archives for "ecological theory of law practice" you'll get a ton of my previous posts.

But. In a nutshell.

Look at opening a law practice as a new species invading or trying to get a foothold in an existing ecology. There are a number of species (existing law practices) in any ecology, and nearly all of the are adapted to fit a particular niche. Species in direct competition with each other usually result in neither of them doing particularly well or one of them dominating the other species to the point of the other species extinction. For a new species to challenge a existing species for a fully filled niche, the new species had better have some big advantage over the other species. If it doesn't, it isn't going to do well. However, instead of challenging the existing species, it may be better off finding an unfilled, or underfilled niche, where it is not in direct competition with another species.

OK, so, what's this got to do with law practice?

First, particularly in urban areas, there's a LOT of lawyers; And a lot of lawyers per potential client. There's dozens, hundreds of PI lawyers, family lawyers, bankruptcy lawyers, etc. Just look at the dang yellow pages, theres' probably huundreds of pages of lawyers. For a new lawyer to open up a practice cold, you have a LOT of competition. And if you're the 201st PI lawyer in a county with 200 PI firms, why the heck would anyone choose you? I'm not saying it's impossible, but it's tough.

Now, you go to either 1) a smaller county with a smaller population but with fewer lawyers per capita OR 2) distinguish yourself from the existing lawyers in some way. How can you distinguish yourself? Well, geography is one way. Look at your county demographics, see 1) where the lawyers are located (which in nearly all counties, the highest concentration of lawyers is down by the courthouse; downtown in the county seat). Then look at your county population centers: are there significant population centers at some distance from the county seat. IF SO, then how many lawyers are near those population centers? People like to go to lawyers near where the live and work.

Real life story 1, Me, Marion County Florida County seat is in Ocala. Ocala is centrally located in fairly geographically large county. Literally, hundreds of lawyers in Ocala. Ocala is a population center. But, at south end of the county is Mega Retirement Community, called The Villages. Right now, 75,000 middle class retirees. When I opened in 1997, we had 35,000 middle class retirees. In 1997 we had grand total of 3 lawyers in The Villages doing wills and estate work. I was fourth. Now, there's 3 of the 4 of us remaining, probably 4 more full time estate planning attorneys, and about 5 or 6 part time satellite offices of estate planning attorneys out of Ocala and other areas. We're still fricking swamped with work. We're STILL underserved.

Real life story 2. Friend of mine in Sarasota County. 2nd or 3rd highest income per capita in the state. The county is long and skinny on the left hand side of Florida. County seat is Sarasota in the North end of the county, and not surprisingly nearly all of the lawyers are in the county seat. South of there is smaller, but still very large city called Venice. Few lawyers down there back in late 90's; they're all in north end. My friend opened up wills/probate/medicaid/g'ship practice there in 99; and he's doing fricking great; I mean THRIVING.

PONT IS: if I were you I would 1) look for a 'less urban' county, where there are fewer lawyers per capita to begin with, and 2) try to locate yourself near population but at some distance away from where most of the lawyers are concentrated. Sorry I can't be more specific, as I don't know TX geography, but that's the best I can give you.

Ronald Jones, Florida

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Your question assumes you're going to have a traditional office in a fixed location.

Forgive me if you've gone over this in other posts, but have you considered bucking the traditional office trend?

A major benefit to \*not\* having a traditional office is that you're not inextricably tied to a geographic area. Your location is wherever you want it to be. You handle cases where you want. You meet clients where it's mutually convenient.

Even if you want a traditional office, maybe you could wait on that for a little while. Hang a shingle, get a UPS Store address near your house, and start helping clients.

You probably have an image right now of what your practice will be like. But I'll bet it will change in six months. You'll figure out what actually pays the bills, where clients are really coming from, and what work you truly enjoy.

At that time, you can re-evaluate the office location question.

By the way, I grew up in Decatur, worked in North Richland Hills, and went to college in Irving. I always thought Bedford would be a great place to live. It seems like a great location at least.

Andrew Flusche, Virginia

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Thanks for the \*very \*informative responses thus far. What prompted this question is a lot of reading of the general advice to consider carefully where one wants to locate one's practice, without any specific tips as to what I'm supposed to be considering. The answers I've received so far have helped to fill in that blank. Specifically I plan on doing disability, bankruptcy, and perhaps wills and probate (or some combination of the three) at the outset, eventually expanding to do whatever other practices suit my fancy and generate revenue. I imagine my future clients are going to be people who aren't going to want to travel far to meet with me, but I feel like that's all I can say with any confidence about what my future clients might be like. That prompted me to wonder whether I should be in a denser urban environment close to people (or at least, a denser suburb than the one I live in) or a little more remote from the competition.

Again, thanks for all the input. It's much appreciated.

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Alex, one more thing you should consider: nowadays, there are many types of practice that really don't

require you to rent an office at all, at least not in the beginning. But one thing that IS required is a presence in the advertising medium most likely to reach your clients -- for me, that has become solely the internet, which is a good thing because it obviates the need for a business phone line and permits me to work almost exclusively from home. In order to attract clients to you on the internet, you will need to have some idea of what areas of law you wish to practice in, and design your web site to focus on those areas.

Kathleen Dillon Hunt, Washington

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Ok, this is good. First off, you're talking about "consumer law"- not necessarily doing FDCPA stuff, but stuff aimed at individuals, families, small business. While some people manage to not have an office, most consumers are going to expect you to have an office.

Geographic location; Once again, I'm convinced too many lawyers locate in the dense population centers. Sure, there's a lot of people, but there's a lot of lawyers up there too in urban centers, particularly in county seat. I'd rather be 3rd or 4th lawyer in a town of 10,000 than the 251st lawyer in a town of 250,000. Do the math: one lawyer per 2500 people or one lawyer per 1000 people: which has fewer lawyers per capita? Odds are, your state transportation dept is on line; you can choose an intersection near where you're considering, and they will tell you how many cars pass that in a given day; you can also choose location, and check with census bureau; they can tell you how many people live within a given radius of that point; THEN look to your bar directory, or failing that, yellow pages, and see how many lawyers are in that area. I'd bet dollars to donuts that smaller towns have a MUCH better population/attorney ratio.

Also: understand this about small towns; as a lawyer, you're a big deal. If you play your cards right, take out an ad announcing your office opening in the LOCAL paper, go by the banks and introduce yourself, open your business account at Bank A and your trust account at Bank B and take out a safe deposit box at one of those banks or Bank C, people will know you and remember you. You go down to the town hall and pull your business license, I guarantee that city clerk will remember you. You're like a doctor; in a small town you're at the top of the social heap. I'm not trying to be classist, but you are big fish in small pond. People will come to you for advice. You're the Lawyer. In big city, you're just another lawyer. And when it comes to practice, in a smaller county the clerks will know you. In a big county, you're just another lawyer. When I run up to the courthouse, it never fails to amaze me that the clerks greet me by name; not just over in Probate, but in circuit Civil and County, where I do relatively little work. But they know me. And if I get them on the phone, it's like, Oh, certainly mr. jones, I'll be happy to help you. And if I screw up, fail to sign a pleading, or forget to include something, they're on the phone to me, Oh, Mr. Jones, you didn't..... and I fix it. You get that kind of service from "big" court clerks? Practically never.

Actual physical location: As between being in an anonymous office building or being in a stand alone or small strip type office building, I'd choose the smaller building. And between being on major highway or heavily traveled secondary road, I'd be on secondary road. Point is, IF you can have your own sign on heavily traveled secondary road, it will draw business. Even if all it says is "Attorney 247-2288". It WILL generate calls if you have enough traffic going past it. If you can get big plate glass window with your name, Attorney at Law, Phone number on it, even better. IF all you got is your name on a plaque, no one will see it from the road. If all you got is tiny sign on road with 55 MPH speed limit, no one will see it.

Ronald Jones, Florida

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I would propose two things and I guess they may be contradictory:

(1) Where do you WANT to practice? When you picture your office, where is it and who is coming in? How do you want to advertise -- as a small friendly local office or as a top notch urban office, convenient to

the powers-that-be?

(2) Go for the smaller location. For personal reasons I had not been full time for a few years (I am now, but was not for 2 years) and I did very little advertising. The only successful PAID advertising I did was a small black-on-white ad in the Monrovia yellowpages. Never heard of Monrovia? Exactly! It is a smallish town with no real urban center, just a cute area with shops and restaurants and a lot of houses a few miles East of Pasadena. I got a decent amount of clients from that tiny ad and they always said the same thing "We of course wanted a local attorney and you are right around the corner!" Especially for your practice areas, there will be a good number of people who feel more comfortable with a smaller-town address. I guess going to a lawyer is uncomfortable enough, they don't want to increase their stress by venturing into the big city!

Amy Kleinpeter, California

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Ron,

I respectfully, but completely, disagree with your statement about consumers expecting attorneys to have an office. (I am assuming you meant a traditional office space.)

I am building a successful traffic / misdemeanor defense practice. Consumers are my clients. Individual, regular people who are charged with a traffic violation or a crime.

I haven't lost a single client due to having a home office.

Consumers don't give a flip what kind of office their attorney has. They want a top notch attorney at an affordable price. They want an attorney who returns their phone calls promptly. They want to be able to email a quick question to their attorney and get a quick response. Consumers want great customer service and solid legal representation.

If anyone asks about my office, I explain that I work from home to save on overhead so I can offer lower rates to my clients. Consumers love that! They don't want to pay for my bloated overhead.

With all that said, maybe a few consumers walk in as prospective clients when you have a traditional office. And it could be beneficial to have an attractive sign in a high-traffic area. But I would argue those benefits alone do not warrant the expenses of a traditional office.

Many successful attorneys cater directly to consumers using alternative office arrangements.

Andrew Flusche, Virginia

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I have to agree with Andrew on this topic. I also work from a home office and only meet with my clients online. My average client is between the ages of 30-60, educated and of moderate-income level. When I explain to them how my services differ from those of a traditional attorney, they tend to become less defensive and intimidated. They end up being appreciative that I can provide them with quality legal services while giving them often more affordable fees because I don't have the overhead costs of a physical law office to worry about. I'm sure it's not for everyone or every practice, but I think many consumers are expecting legal professionals to give them alternatives to traditional office appointments just as they are expecting this convenience from every other professional industry.

Stephanie L. Kimbro, North Carolina

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I've been reading thing thread and have thoroughly enjoyed this discussion on the age old question of whether or not you should have an office and if you do what is the proper location of that office. I am currently planning on opening up a practice in Palm Beach County in Florida and as Ronald stated there are a lot of lawyers here in Florida especially in the city centers. Originally, my thought process was to start off with a virtual office where I would have the option to rent a conference room if needed to meet with clients. I'm planning on having a consumer law practice like Alexander but didn't want to be centrally located in the city center of West Palm Beach because I the lawyer per client ratio is extremely low in downtown West Palm Beach. That being said if you open an office that is not located in a dense population area or choose to open a virtual law practice is it a lot harder to establish relationships with other lawyers and professionals which may lead to referrals in the future? I'm trying to determine the advantages and disadvantages of having a virtual office as a newly minted lawyer. Thanks!

Richard Carey

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OK, as many of you may know, I just signed a lease for a new office two months ago (has it been that long already? Wow). SO, sitting here at my desk (looking out the window at the lush landscape and mountains of Kauai... sorry), I thought I could maybe add something to this discussion, in the form of WHY I LOVE MY OFFICE AWAY FROM HOME (I already did a list of "why I love working at home" a few months ago - guess what I really love is having the option to do whichever suits the task/my mood/other circumstances):

1. Don't have to explain or justify to clients, or find places to meet them (or, deity forbid, bring them to my messy house). Clients expect a lawyer to have an office; if you have one, it's a non-issue.
2. I can have my office in a central location, easy for clients to find, and my house in a residential area (hard for clients to find).
3. My office building has an elevator, which is helpful for the elderly and disabled; my house doesn't. Though I still go to clients' homes if that's most convenient for them, but some of them have messy houses and don't want me coming over, I'm sure.
4. I have a place for things. Like, office supplies, a fast (but cheap) copier, client files, etc. I don't have room for that stuff at my house. Also, when I leave the scissors/stapler/tape/whatever on my desk, they're THERE when I come back in the morning (not having been 'borrowed' by gremlins otherwise known as my family).
5. It's air conditioned here. Not so at my house. Nice on hot days. Easier to wear 'work-y' clothes (suits, long pants) with A/C.
6. Another space to decorate, where I can use colors, pictures, etc. that my family might not necessarily like. And clients don't have to be subjected to almost-obscene Frank Zappa posters.
7. Good excuse to buy (2nd hand, but still) a nice teak conference table, where there's room to sit down with 3 or 4 others, or spread out a bunch of documents I'm compiling or reviewing for a case. Not to mention a really nice (OK, Costco, not that nice) desk.
8. I can have a conversation with a client without worrying whether my hubby or son will flush the toilet, the microwave will start beeping, or some other obnoxious noise or odor will occur.
9. My office is next door to my bank and the post office. Convenient.
10. Clients can see all my fancy diplomas hanging up when they come in.
11. Easier to minimize distractions. Not tempting to do a load of laundry, sweep the floor, walk around the

block, go visit hubby in his shop, etc., instead of writing that brief that's due tomorrow.

I'm sure there are more, but I'm out of time for now. Gotta get back to that brief 🤔.

Cynthia Hannah-White, Hawaii

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#1 reason to have an office away from the house:

When I leave the office, the work stays there and does not come home with me.

Some people compartmentalize their lives better than I do, but when I was working from home I was at work 24/7. It wasn't good for either the work or my life. I need that 6 block commute to separate the part of my life that is about the needs of my clients and the demands of courts and opposing counsel, and the part that is about me and my family. YMM(APW)V.

Wendell Finner, Florida

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I would argue that a traditional office has no bearing on building relationships with lawyers, other professionals, business owners, etc.

We just had a lively thread where most people said you shouldn't just drop in on colleagues to meet them. The majority of people said you should call ahead and setup an appointment. Thus, it doesn't matter where you work. You can plan to meet people at their office for their convenience. Or you can invite them out for coffee or lunch.

I've met most of the local colleagues that I know through the local bar association and just being friendly at the courthouse. It doesn't matter a single bit that I work from home.

To meet other types of professionals and business owners, find a networking group or check out the local chamber of commerce. No traditional office needed.

With all that said, there are surely instances where people develop relationships by being neighbors in an office building or office sharing. But I've also heard from people who worked in a big office building where nobody really knew anyone else in the other suites.

My point: A traditional office isn't a relationship magnet, and a home office isn't a relationship black hole. Relationships take effort, and anyone can build them.

Andrew Flusche, Virginia

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There is no right answer here. There is only a question...

\*Do the clients you hope to serve expect you to have an office?\*

If so, then you need an office. It's really not more complicated than that. I can promise you that there are potential clients out there who care a great deal about whether you have an office. Also, there are people who don't care at all. So, in the end, you have to decide which you care about more. Are you willing to lose some potential clients in order to have the luxury and economy of a home-based law firm? For some, the answer is yes, and for others it is no.

Maybe that's the reason why folks disagree. There's just too much personal preference built into the equation.

For those of you with traditional office, have a great weekend at home. And for the rest, I'm sorry you'll be stuck at the office all weekend! 😊

Cheers,

David Hiersekorn, California