Intake Forms

A July 2011 discussion on SoloSez, the email listserv for general practice, solo and small firm lawyers

My intake forms are junk. Anybody got one they can send my way?

I've honestly never understood the concept of intake forms. I just chat with my clients over the phone and get the basic case details. If they want to hire me, I get their other info and setup the file. Our case management program prompts us to fill in the basic fields: name, phone number, case type, court, etc. The other case details just go in a note on the file.

Andrew

Andrew Flusche, Virginia

One reason intake forms are a good idea is to CYA. A checklist of important topics and potential case issues where the client must initial each line is a great defense to "You never told me that could happen."

I'm not saying I do this all the time, but I should.

Jake C. Eisenstein, Colorado

I have a different intake form for different areas - it makes everything much more efficient. I have different ones for litigation, probate, estate planning, criminal record expungements, trademarks and business formations. This works out well for me because these different practice areas require different pieces of information: with trademarks, I explain the concept of "proofs" and ask the client to list the three proofs they will send me - this would be irrelevant to anything other than a trademark application; with business formation I will need a social security number to obtain a TIN/EIN - I don't need this for litigation or expungements.

I also found intake sheets to be useful for recommending additional services (NOT upselling!). Sometimes a client will want to form a business with a really catchy name and they don't want anyone else to use something like it. Granted, common law trademark protection may apply, but why not register it to be safe? My business formation intake form reminds me to discuss this with everyone forming a business.

If I am meeting with the client, I will have them fill out the intake sheet after I've been hired (ie: sign the fee agreement). Sometimes I'll fill out the sheet myself if I'm doing everything over the phone or the Internet.

Either way, I always have the client sign the intake sheet as a CYA measure.

Nicholas Proy, Maryland

hmmm... never thought to have client sign intake form.. but then, my intake form is essentially a combination of the data required for a divorce complaint and a statistical form (required as part of the divorce process). Not sure what having the client sign, would accomplish. Perhaps I should modify my intake form, but then it sounds like it's really an information form I should be providing, if I'm using the form and the client's sig, as a cya measure.

I guess I'm still not sure what the client's sig is accomplishing. My fee agreement has them acknowledging certain things (ie.. I won't settle without their approval, I can withdraw if they don't pay their bill, or withhold information, or ask me to do something I consider to be unethical... etc)...and on a case by case basis, I'll send a letter saying "I advise you do X, because of these factors. You have said you want to do Z. This is why I think you shouldn't do Z. If you still want to do Z, sign the extra copy of this letter and return it." But a client's sig on intake notes? Maybe I'm missing something here.

Laurie

Laurie Axinn Gienapp, Massachusetts

Any interest out there for an intake form posted on a website? It seems that the data collected on an intake form will be used throughout the attorney/client relationship. It's probably possible to collect data on an online intake form and then generate other documents automatically.

Joshua L. Smith, Idaho

I agree with the poster that indicated they had separate intakes for different types of law. What areas do you practice in? I can perhaps send something off list.

I'm currently in the process of creating a number of different forms; I'm at a general practice. My method so far has been to scavenge the internet for samples (lots of attorneys put theirs on their websites.) I also use court forms--such as pro-se custody petitions, etc. to glean the important information in order to create my own forms. And for me, the forms are a work in progress as I'm a new attorney and each client brings something to the table that makes me realize, hm... I should get that information up front next time.

Valerie Borek

I like this approach. I have a general intake to get basic information for my files. For bankruptcy, I have a specific intake form with the information I need to judge a case. For everything else, I talk to the client and see if I can help. I take notes on the file and that is it unless I take the case. I have a retainer for Chapter 13, one for Chapter 7 (neither of which I like) and one for general cases.

I handle some of what Nicholas handles and get what I need by talking to the client.

I have three workbooks for bankruptcy that I got from other attorneys and am trying to combine them and pare them down to something short and to the point.

I try to make clients fill out as little as possible so we can focus on the problem (and documents) at hand.

If anyone wants to share, I would love to see other ideas and examples that would help me be efficient. Right now, I have time on my hands so efficiency has taken a back seat to trying to get clients and money in the door.

Mitchell Goldstein

That's similar to how our system is setup, only we enter the data.

PC calls, and we open a "new contact" form in our system. Every case has at least name, phone number, case type, and locality (where the case is pending). We also get how they found out about us whenever possible.

From there, we (usually my assistant) can tell if it's something we want. If not, she has the necessary info to lookup a referral.

If it's a case we want, we get a few additional details, but there's really not much else needed. Court date, specific charges / tickets, but that's about it.

If the client wants to hire, we then get email address, mailing address, birth date, and driver's license number.

My rule of thumb is to only press for information when it's needed. If we asked for everyone's mailing address and birth date right off the bat, some people wouldn't feel comfortable with that.

And of course the forms we enter everything into are all tied to the database, so all future things for each client get generated from one data entry.

I've definitely mulled over the concept of having clients submit everything online. At the end of the day, the phone is quick and to the point.

Andrew

Andrew Flusche

I'm primarily criminal defense and DUI, but in my small town nobody's a specialist. So anything besides bankruptcy would be appreciated.

Clark V. Stewart, Alabama

As of right now, we enter their information into our system using an internal form built in Infusionsoft. The form automatically sends their information into our database. In response to this thread, I put up a quick and dirty page on my site to show you what the form looks like. That form is at:

http://www.privatecounsel.com/tell-us-about-yourself (I've disabled the follow-up actions, and I know the descriptions aren't super-friendly. Remember, this was designed as an INTERNAL form.)

Let me sing Infusionsoft's praises here for a second. Here's what happens when this form is filled out. Depending on which area they are interested in, they get added to a different follow-up sequence. For example, it's Elder Law, then they will begin getting emails about the importance of elder law planning. They will be invited to log in to our password-protect Resource Center. Because they are interested in elder law, only those resources will be visible. They won't see, for example, information about asset protection or advanced estate planning. Also, the marketing message changes depending estate size, property, and so on.

Everything happens automagically. I've spent a lot of time setting it up, so this isn't standard out-of-the-box Infusionsoft stuff. But, I've got it set so that the articles they read, the videos they watch, and the information they provide us all goes into the system and adjusts the marketing that they receive. For example, if they have a blended family, I have a video that I very much want them to watch. The first thing I do is send them an email suggesting that they watch it. If they click on that link, it tags their record that they clicked it. When they watch the video, there is a simple form that asks "Was this video useful?" Their answer is also saved in their record.

So, if they haven't clicked the video link, then I keep sending them information about blended family planning until they watch the dang video. If they click the link, but haven't completed the survey form, then they get added to an email sequence that asks what they thought of the video and reshares the link. If they watched the video and found it useful, then they start getting emails designed to entice them to add our blended family package to their estate plan. If they didn't find it useful, they get added to a "rescue" sequence that includes a phone call referencing the survey response and asking whether they had any questions.

And so on. It's really pretty cool. And, if there are any Infusionsoft users who didn't know you could do all this kind of stuff, I can recommend some classes/resources/developers. Email me privately. (And, for list rules purposes, I'm not affiliated with any of these companies/folks, etc., except as a customer.)

Cheers,

David Allen Hiersekorn, California

Andrew,

I knew that you'd have this worked out.

David,

What's the reluctance with posting your form on your website? This question isn't a rhetorical question. I'm sure there are reasons. I'm just curious.

Joshua L. Smith

I'm not really reluctant to post the form on my site. It's just that I don't think people would give me that much sensitive information up front over the web. This is the information we ask someone who's been referred by a trusted referral source.

When people come in cold off the internet, we only ask for their name and email address. They are sent to watch videos that warm them up to the idea of giving us the expanded information. Many times, they are giving us information without knowing it. For example, if they are logged in to our secure site, I can update their records based on every click. So, for example, when they click on the link for our pricing page, I update the record to reflect that they've seen our prices (and which price schedule, in case we later change them). More importantly, we track how they LEFT the price page - i.e. did they leave through the "tell me more" door, or through the "holy crap, this is too expensive" door?

Cheers,

David Allen Hiersekorn

While perusing the SoloSez archives today I saw intake forms listed...

Susan Gregory Liammari, Florida

It does depend on what kind of law you're practicing. I have my clients fill in my estate planning intake form in their own handwriting. Twice now it has come in handy when a client came back or when a family member of a deceased client came back to claim that I misspelled someone's name in estate planning documents and I could show that I spelled it the way the client instructed me to spell it. The fact that it was written in the client's own handwriting absolved me of writing it down wrong.

Naomi C. Fujimoto, Hawaii