

Prefix “Attorney” before Name

To follow the other thread, I've seen attorneys use the word "Attorney" as a prefix before their name, like "Dr." They will refer to themselves as "Attorney Smith," on their website, or have their assistant refer to them as such. When their secretary calls me, they'll say "Attorney Shulman."

What's up with that? I find it very odd. Seems like doctor envy to me. (And don't get me started on people who think because they have a Juris Doctor, that they can call themselves Dr. Smith).

That is a Southern thing. It is a title of courtesy and respect like doctor.

Eliz. C.A. Johnson, California

The only time I've really encountered this is in court if the judge likes addressing attorneys by Counselor Name or Attorney Name. I haven't experienced it between attorneys though----that is weird.

Grace Crivello,

I find it curious as well. Is it a regional thing?

Jeena R. Belil, New York

Use it occasionally mostly to let the peson I'm calling I'm not just some random Joe Blow.

John Davidson, Pennsylvania

It is a regional thing, in my estimation. I didn't hear it in California, but it's done in Vermont.

L. Max Taylor

In New England I see it all the time. Judges regularly refer to attorneys in that way. I will address a letter to an attorney I don't know by referring to them as "Attorney Smith".

Michelle Kainen, Vermont

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I sometimes say "Attorney" before my name when calling family members of clients or witnesses or other non-parties, to signal that I am an attorney. I don't expect them to know without me telling them. Or when someone else answers the phone and I'm asking them to put my client on the line, like when I call a jail to talk to a client. I also do it when I call the court, so the clerk knows I'm an attorney.

I have had several Filipina clients who just call me, "Attorney." These are recent immigrants who have probably never dealt with the court system before. Most of my other clients call me by my first name. These clients just call me, "Attorney." Like after a court hearing, I'll hear, "Thank you so much, Attorney." Probably similar to what I would say to a doctor, although I might add their last name.

I feel like if you're younger, female, or just out of law school, then Esquire and Attorney add to your gravitas. JD signals to me that the person is not licensed in any state, but has graduated law school.

Monica Elkinton, Alaska

I also have Filipino clients who call me Attorney Fujimoto even if they are second or third generation Americans.

Naomi C. Fujimoto, Hawaii

I think the main point is that any kind of honorific or title only has meaning if someone else uses it for you; it's usually silly if you use it for yourself. Unless it's in a context where the title or initials indicate some information that is relevant to the listeners.

So you don't call yourself Attorney or Esq. Others can call you that and it's fine.

You don't introduce yourself as Mr. X (unless, maybe, it's to a child). You introduce yourself as Joe X, and let someone else then refer to you as Mr.

Do you think President Obama introduces himself as "President Obama" or Barack Obama?

Patrick W. Begos, Connecticut

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Yes, I would agree that it's very regional and "cultural." It took me a couple years to get used to it here in the South, as I'd never encountered it before. It's widespread generally, and almost strictly predictable with African American clients. Seems hit-or-miss with Hispanic clients; I've had a limited number of Hispanic clients, but I'd say it's more common 1) with women, and 2) the more recently they have arrived in the U.S.

I also find that lawyers tend to introduce themselves as "Attorney Smith," perhaps in hopes of improving the odds of getting past the assistant.

-Rick

Richard J. Rutledge, Jr., North Carolina

This thread reminds me.

When you take the bench, as some of you will, do not sign orders as, for example, "Judge Rob Robertson."

In times gone by when I served as a municipal judge, a fellow judge who took the bench at the same time, signed that way. I could not believe it. It did not last long. The presiding judge was a kindly soul and I think he pulled her aside and clued her in. And do folks a favor, sign your name legibly.

Rob V. Robertson, Texas

I find it a measure of respect. When I first meet a lawyer I say something along the line of, "Attorney Crivello, my name is Bill Driscoll and I represent client-x." From then on we are on a first name basis.

I still refer to opposing counsel by title when speaking with my client. It serves the purpose of recognizing that the lawyers involved are two legal professionals working a legal matter.

Very truly yours,
Bill

William M. Driscoll, Massachusetts

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I often refer to myself on the phone as "Attorney Cynthia VanDeVoorde Hall" (or some variant thereof) to signal to the caller (big surprise) that I am an attorney, which I find to be very important to tell them at the get-go. I don't want to mislead anyone as to who I am or why I am calling, and I find I often get directly connected to the legal department, rather than having to go through a bunch of other red tape. It will get lost if you say it later, but if "attorney" is said before your name it won't. I _always_ use it when calling another law firm. It is also common in the south to refer to or address attorneys that way. I know you are in in south Florida (which is basically New York), but it isn't too terribly uncommon a bit further north from you. Often clients start out referring to me that way. I really don't have any doctor envy.

However, once we get through to each other, I don't see it used as often between attorneys when addressing each other, other than during hearings sometimes. Again, I think it is used primarily for clarity then (the folks in the courtroom may not remember everyone's name, but when you are referring to Attorney so-and-so, they know who it is).

Cynthia V. Hall, Florida

I'm a little late to the party on this one.

I have never seen attorneys address each other this way, but I've had many clients on their own call me "Attorney Lyon". Sounds awkward to me, but if they prefer it that's fine. I will risk skewing the convo despite the OP's warning: Lawyers aren't called "Doctor" in the US (or other former British territories) but they are in Europe and South America. I read that this was because the English legal system was premised on apprenticeships rather than a law degree. A lawyer in the English Common Law system might never have earned the title "doctor" but in Europe they generally did. Technically if you have a J.D. you should be able to be called Doctor (though as Miss Manners says, one should never refer to one's self with a title or honorific. That is for others to show respect to you).

However, it used to be the case - and may still be - that it is a violation of the lawyer's rules of conduct in Maryland to call yourself "Doctor" with a law degree only, because most people will think you mean medical doctor and therefore it's a misleading communication to potential clients.

Crazy rules we live in. Easier just to have people call me Vincent.

Though someone recently asked me "Do you prefer Vince or Vincent?" and I answered "I prefer Mr. Lyon."

Vincent T. Lyon, Maryland

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A little off track from this discussion, but my wife's former boss was a PhD but definitely not an MD. They worked in an out-patient hospital setting and it always bothered me that he insisted on being referred to as "doctor."

Andrew O. Mays

Like Monika, an attorney in the firm where I "of counsel" handles a lot of calls, pursuant to a state legal services contract, with potential clients who are completely unfamiliar with the legal system, he calls himself "Attorney Jones" so they know they are having a conversation with a lawyer. I have also noticed clients use it as a respectful way of addressing me. I personally call other attorneys "counsel" .

Audrey Cosgrove

Recognizing that the discussion has gone beyond how a lawyer (or judge) should refer to themselves; it has morphed into how others should refer to lawyers. To that I add my two cents.

I like it when people return to their lawyer as "Attorney LastName" (though soon after representation they refer to me as "Bill" when talking with me directly). Professionally, I refer to another lawyer as "Attorney LastName" if I initiate the meeting then by first name thereafter; though I do begin a correspondence to them as "Dear Attorney LastName" as it will be copied to the client.

Then again, I believe teachers should be referred to as either "Mr./Ms. LastName" or "Professor" rather than by their first name. It is not an issue of ego, but rather one of respect. Whether I am representing a client or teaching at law school I am not a buddy or a pal, I am in a professional role with duties and obligations to fulfill.

I hypothesize that when people stop using title altogether it is all too easy to deteriorate into a less professional atmosphere. I question whether this may have contributed to the deterioration of the legal community in the eyes of the public, and potentially between lawyers. My medical professionals refer to each other as "Dr. LastName" when speaking to publicly or to a patient. I wonder if lawyers did the same whether it would improve relations.

Very truly yours,
Bill

William M. Driscoll,

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Hi Brian,

You raise a good point; there is a time and a place for everything. Professional titles are not meaningful in the social context... unless you're trying to get a better table in a restaurant...

Very truly yours,
Bill

William M. Driscoll,

My Filipino clients do the same.

But are we talking about addressing someone as Attorney *Last Name*, or calling ourselves Attorney *Our Last Name.*"

Joseph D. Dang, California

I call myself Attorney Monica Elkinton sometimes. I very rarely (if ever) refer to another attorney as Attorney Jane Doe or Attorney Doe. Usually I just say "Counsel" or "Plaintiff's Counsel" in court, or if not in court, by their name.

Around my client, I'm usually calling the other attorney by their first name, and my client is calling me by my first name.

Does anyone use "brother counsel" or "sister counsel"? I heard that in law school and have never heard it again. (Like so many things, really.)

Monica Elkinton

The "brother/sister counsel" thing is popular in Massachusetts.

The whole topic of when to use Attorney or Esquire (Esq.) is very fact dependent. I can think of times I refer of myself as "Attorney Bill Driscoll," such as when I call other attorneys and reach staff (so that they have a clue it's a professional call). On the other hand, I am not offended if a caller does not refer to me in the same manner (then again I answer the phone).

The South American community likes to call me "Notary Driscoll." Apparently that is how they refer to a lawyer down there.

All I know is that I have been called a number of different things...

Very truly yours,
Bill

William M. Driscoll

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Two tales of how you address opposing counsel, both individuals who originated the issue have passed away and are somewhat famous.

One was famous for not ever using opposing counsel or their client's name during deposition, hearings, or trial. It drove some lawyers nuts on occasion and the attorney enjoyed it.

A second attorney ALWAYS called opposing counsel "my friend" in all depositions, hearings or trials. Lawyers would take issue because their client heard the terms and it was in all the transcripts. They would throw tantrums on occasion, which provided a lot of comic relief. Again, I believe it was done for psychological advantage.

Both stories came to mind after reading about the "brother counsel" and "sister counsel" posting.

Darrell G. Stewart, Texas

> "All I know is that I have been called a number of different things..."

But can any of the names you been called be published in a family newspaper?

-- {John}

John A. Davidson

William makes a good point that made me think of something I didn't mention in my last post. I do criminal defense work. Whenever I send an email or letter to the opposing district attorney, I always address them as Attorney so and so. I do this to remind myself that I am communicating something relating to a client's case - something that may be eventually reviewed by the client or another entity (appellate attorney/professional responsibility board). It seems overly formal, especially since I see these attorneys every day and joke around with them while in court waiting for cases to be called. But the informal banter and humor shouldn't be included in professional correspondence, at least in my opinion. Also, I have found that some clients would rather be under the impression that the district attorney and I are not "friendly".

Brian Hagner, Wisconsin
