

Virtual Office – Do You Tell Your Clients?

Hi all - I have an initial client meeting with potential client on Thurs. This will be my first client that does not know that I am currently working from home simply because I personally know the others. I plan on meeting him at a virtual office space, which I think will be pretty obvious that it's not just MY office. Or even MY office within a large group of other people's offices.

How do you guys usually address this with clients? Are you up front about it? Try to meet in public places instead of an office? Just use a virtual office and say nothing about whether its yours?

Thanks for the thoughts!

Up until a couple of months ago, I only had a home office and faced this dilemma every time a meeting came up. I always address it up front. I don't ever want a client to think that I'm trying to hide something or deceive them in the least. I know other attorneys that use virtual space and never address it with their clients. I don't think either way is "right" or "wrong" but this is just the way I handle it.

The other thing I explain to the clients is that by not having the overhead of office space, I can keep their fees more reasonable. Saving the client some money is always something they understand and appreciate.

Just my \$.02\$

Ryan N. Hejmanowski, Illinois

Depends is your client one of the people who serve Chef Ramsey some over cooked slop and then try to tell him it's delicious? In short do you think your client is a bit thick?

When he walks in he or she should notice. If not be honest. It gives him an opportunity to show how frugal you are and that the client is paying for atmosphere.

John Davidson, Pennsylvania

SoloSez Popular Threads, August 2014

Most of my family law clients in California are too self-absorbed with their own drama to care about your office space so long as you are a good listener and appear to be eager to resolve their issues. I only discuss it if the PC asks.

Matthew Rosenthal, California

My "office" is an 8' x 10' windowless former storage closet on a floor that used to be part of a large local law firm. It is now a combination of "virtual" offices and small offices, with a shared receptionist, conference rooms, lunch room, copier, etc. Perhaps one day I'll upgrade to an office with a window, or a mini-suite.

When I meet with single clients, I meet in my office; it has one guest chair. I explain to clients that "I really only need room for myself and my thoughts - and occasionally someone like you." It helps keep costs down, and they seem to appreciate that. When I meet with more than one person, I meet in a conference room (as I do when my office is cluttered or the guest chair has a pile of books or files on it).

So far, I'm not aware of anyone going elsewhere because of it. I don't really want clients who are impressed by fancy offices or lavish lobbies; they would likely be disappointed by my straightforward approach to litigation (and life).

-Rick

Richard J. Rutledge, Jr., North Carolina

I work from home, and I meet people in public places like the library, Starbucks, etc. It used to bother me to tell people I worked from home, when I first started out, I felt like I was less of a lawyer because I didn't have an office or something, and thought my clients would think the same thing. Now, I'm over it, I have plenty of work, and if someone seems put off I am very blunt and explain that if they want to pay extra for a lawyer to have a fancy office or fancy furniture to park their rear in, they can happily go pay for it. Well, I'm not quite that blunt, but I do explain that no overhead means I can charge less than other lawyers. Being competent has nothing to do with having an office, it took me awhile to be confident in that. :)

Kimberly Vereb, Indiana

I agree with Ryan in that I keep my overhead low by not having a brick-and-mortar office. But, that is a practice sensitive issue.

When I was doing trial litigation, and some transactional work, I had a brick-and-mortar office. In retrospect, when client meetings were few I would rather have had a virtual office where I could meet clients without the "permanent" overhead. So what if it is not furnished to your specs (e.g., diploma on the wall). Some lawyers always meet clients in a conference room (what I would be doing in the virtual office). The important thing to remember is to not blur the lines for the client--you are the attorney not the firm where you meet with the client.

In my appellate practice I travel the state for meetings, not that I have a lot of meetings. Most of my criminal clients require "house calls." As for the remainder, I accomplish a lot more by traveling to the client, and perhaps their trial attorney or the trial court to acquire records, than to have the client travel to me. Besides, much of my work is done electronically (including telephonically).

Before I became a lawyer I had the occasion to interact with an appellate lawyer. I knew his address, but when we needed to meet I was asked to meet him at the state bar association building where he rented a conference room for the meeting (I think it was \$25 per hour). I did not care one way or the other; but I am a results oriented person.

I believe people are a lot more tolerant of virtual law offices today than ten or twenty years ago. It is inevitable given technology. Twenty years ago people still went to "the mall" to shop; today they primarily go to the Internet." When I mention to people that by not funding a permanent office location their rates are lower, they are happy. They get the message; that is what Internet shopping has brought. It's not a new concept any more.

On the other hand, I know attorneys with a brick-and-mortar office. They have always had one. They have a "steady" flow of people for litigation matters who ultimately find what they can see on TV law shows. It's an easy sell. There is no talk of how the overhead figures into the fee charged to the client. The client is presented with an acceptable picture and therefore accepts it for how lawyers work.

When I started, that is also what I thought. A lawyer has an "office" with staff and furniture and books. What I learned, the hard way, is that staff and furniture and books cost money that was unnecessary to my practice. I could do litigation using a virtual office at a lower rate. How low depends on the amenities of the virtual space (i.e., staffed or not, borrowed or rented on a one-up basis or monthly basis, etc). Books are replaced by online services and, where needed, a trip to the library.

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In the end, the "requirement" for a brick-and-mortar office is twofold. First, what is the need by your practice area(s)? Second, what is your desire (e.g. traditional or virtual)? Once you have comfortably answered those questions, the rest is a matter of marketing. What a lawyer sells is their competence to accomplish the client's needs. Whether you choose to rent a downtown penthouse or meet at a bar association conference room is a matter of marketing.

That's my two cents. I welcome other's comments.

Very truly yours,

Bill

William M. Driscoll, Massachusetts

Hi Kimberly,

Well stated. I felt the same way at first and have come to the same conclusion.

Very truly yours,

Bill

William M. Driscoll

I always raise the issue of having a virtual office to any PCs. It serves as a nice transition into discussing how I provide value for my clients (instead of talking about price). So far I've only had positive responses to the virtual office discussion, but I'm dealing primarily with small businesses and start-ups who understand the necessity of low overhead in starting a business. The virtual office discussion also lets my clients know that we think similarly, or so I believe.

Best of luck with the PC! =]

Sincerely,

Roger R. Quiles, New York

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Many good points made. My first boss would meet people at Mac Donalds before he had an office., that expanded then contracted.

Personally I first rented a very small office with a shared conference room. Then got a huge space then downsided to a a smaller office that still has room for 4 people.

In the end it depends on your clientele. For me I get people driving by my busy street, walk ins. For you maybe advertising and a home or virtual office is best for you. As far as disclosure, in Florida it's required.

gilbert valdes alba, Florida

Hi Roger,

You have an excellent point and practice. As an aside, do your business clients prefer that you meet them at their office anyway? I heard that was a good practice; get to "know" the client's business and environment.

Very truly yours,

Bill

William M. Driscoll

How do you deal with confidentiality issues at a place like Starbucks?

Lisa Solomon, New York

I understand and agree. Have had that issue myself sometimes. Are you ever concerned about confidentiality, though, or being overheard? Have your clients expressed any concerns about that? If so, how do you address them?

Sue-Ellen Kresh, Maine

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I used to have an office. I was never there. I was at client homes all day and then worked from home in the evenings. It was a waste of rent for me and I tell people that who care to know. I meet at their homes or offices for their convenience which people like. I make it easy. Don't be defensive or feel like less of an attorney because you home office. A lot of us do.

Eliz. C.A. Johnson, California

I am today closing up my office because I am never there. I furnished it beautifully with flea market finds, had a window with trees so close I saw birds all the time. Hard to give up because I loved it so much. Now I have an opportunity to split a gorgeous first floor suite with another attorney - similar practice areas but not a competitor. Office 1 mile from my house. Have a couple friends interested in a 'virtual' share, which would work great because I work a lot from home and do house calls. So could be reasonable. Would use it a few hours a day. But still, I'm ambivalent.... When you tell clients its to keep costs down, do they ever kvetch when they get your bill?

Margaret Wadsworth, South Carolina

They do appreciate me visiting their office since they don't have to lose any time traveling and it allows me to understand their business better. Also, by seeing their environment, it occasionally helps me raise additional issues that they may not have considered or even hired me for. So it also helps me market additional services.

Best,

Roger

Sincerely,
Roger R. Quiles
