

# an **A** How to choose **Attorney**

Hiring an attorney doesn't have to be as complicated as it seems. Find out how to choose the right attorney for you, and how to better prepare for the first meet and greet.

BY MICHELLE WEYENBERG

**I**n the world of attorneys, there are typically two types of clients, said Chris Villaseñor, partner in the litigation department of San Diego's Catalyst Law Group.

There is the person who brings in just a business card and a few documents relating to the matter at hand. Nothing else. Then there is the client carrying a large box full of unorganized papers. Both have the same important question: Can you help me?

It's understandable, and most attorneys realize the panic and urgency of many potential clients. But before a lawyer

can help you find solutions, there are a few things you need to do in order to make the process go forward smoothly.

And with most people clueless on where to begin, OurCity identifies the most critical questions. What type of lawyer do I need, and how much is it going to cost?

Overall, the most important thing is that you feel comfortable with the attorney.

"At the end of the day, every attorney-client relationship is that — a relationship," said Tom Jurgensen, managing partner at Catalyst Law Group. "[Clients] need to know that [attorneys] are looking out for their best interest."



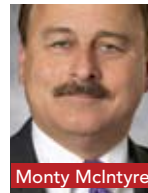
# OurCity Recommended Attorneys

Avvo, Inc., a Seattle company that rates and profiles attorneys nationwide, has teamed up with *OurCity San Diego* magazine to present these lists of top lawyers in San Diego. Attorneys are ranked based on their professional backgrounds according to Avvo's proprietary algorithms. The Avvo Rating is a score on a 10-point scale distilled from the raw rankings generated by Avvo. The ratings and rankings were calculated April 13, 2009.

SPECIALTY	ATTORNEY	FIRM
Consumer/ Small Business Finance	James Spievak	James R. Spievak APC
	Dean Kirby	Kirby & McGuinn APC
	Daniel Grindle	Law Offices of Daniel W. Grindle
	Antonio Maldonado	Maldonado & Markham, LLP
	Robert Miller	Robert Miller & Associates
	Monty McIntyre	Seltzer Caplan McMahon Vitek
	James Hill	Sullivan Hill Lewin Rez & Engel
Criminal	Martin Waters	Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati
	Allen Bloom	Allen R. Bloom
	Bruce White	Bruce A. White, Attorney at Law
	Charles Sevilla	Charles Sevilla Law Office
	Robert Grimes	Grimes & Warwick
	John Phillips	John G. Phillips, APC
	Knut Johnson	Knut S. Johnson
Estate Planning	Mary Prevost	Law Offices of Mary Prevost
	Michael Crowley	Michael L. Crowley
	Shirley Kovar	Branton & Wilson, A Professional Corporation
	Judith Copeland	Copeland & Tierman, LLP
	Gary Powell	Gary Powell, Esq.
	Jack Charney	Henderson Caverly Pum & Charney LLP
	Frederick Vandever	Luce Forward Hamilton & Scripps
Family	Michelle Graham	Luce Forward Hamilton & Scripps
	Mark Zatt	Mark E. Zatt Professional Corporation
	Michael Wexler	Wexler Law Group
	James Allen	Allen - Slattery, Inc.
	Sharon Blanchet	Ashworth, Blanchet, Christenson & Kalemkarian
	Lesa Christenson	Ashworth, Blanchet, Christenson & Kalemkarian
	Robert Wood	Hervey & Wood, APC
Personal Injury	Michelle Brown	Law Office of Beatrice L. Snider, APC
	Beatrice Snider	Law Offices of Beatrice L. Snider, APC
	Julia Garwood	Law Offices of Julia M. Garwood, APC
	Virginia Gaburo	Virginia H. Gaburo, Esq.
	William Berman	Berman & Riedel LLP
	Frederick Schenk	Casey Gerry Schenk Francavilla Blatt & Penfield, LLP
	John Philips	John G. Phillips, APC
Personal Injury	Robert Wayne	Kirby Noonan Lance & Hoge LLP
	Anthony Thompson	Law Office of Harold D. Thompson
	Richard Huvar	Levine, Steinberg, Miller & Huver
	Craig McClellan	The McClellan Law Firm
	Randall Walton	Walton Barber LLP



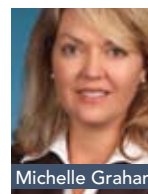
Dean T. Kirby Jr.



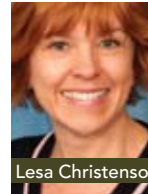
Monty McIntyre



Bruce White



Michelle Graham



Lesa Christenson



Sharon Blanchet



Fred Schenk

For an in-depth, at your finger-tips look at local attorneys, OurCity teamed up with Avvo Inc., a Seattle company that rates and profiles attorneys nationwide, to present a list of top lawyers in San Diego.

The OurCity Recommended Attorneys are ranked in five specialty areas — probate and trusts, family, criminal, personal injury and consumer and small business finance. You can find these attorneys on the chart on the left.

## Get organized

Time is critical when the need for an attorney arises on a case-by-case basis. Your best bet is to get organized and come prepared.

“A lot of times people don’t understand the nature of their problems,” Jurgensen said. “Is it a tax matter or state matter? A little time invested up front will help them smooth the process and help them to more likely find the right attorney.”

Potential clients should come in with a good idea of what they are looking for. Figure out what your goals are and how much can you afford to move forward on those goals, Villasenor said.

An attorney can identify important legal consequences that may affect you, provide you with options and give you advice about your next course of action. Time is more than likely not on your side, especially as important deadlines approach quickly.

Jurgensen advises people looking for an attorney to be proactive. Whether you need a contract drafted or are just looking for legal advice about a certain situation, research should be your first course of action.

There are various sources available for finding an attorney in San Diego County. Many start with a referral from a friend or family member. For background information, you can check The State Bar of California ([www.calbar.ca.gov](http://www.calbar.ca.gov)).

Most attorneys offer free consultation, so get in there and get help.

“People will wait and think they can take care of it themselves,” Jurgensen said. “And time is usually not your friend. Things fade, memories fade and documents disappear.”

Develop a clear understanding about

For a detailed look at each OurCity Recommended Attorney, go to [ourcitysd.com/thisissue](http://ourcitysd.com/thisissue).

what you hope to accomplish by meeting with your attorney. Decide what your goals are, Jurgensen said.

You also should ask about different billing methods. Cost definitely varies. For example, hiring a lawyer to represent you for a traffic violation is much cheaper than retaining counsel to fight a criminal charge.

Is the best lawyer always the most

### The meet and greet

The free consultation is the initial meet and greet, Villasenor said. While discussing your case, you'll find out here if there are any disagreements between you and the attorney. Can you work well together? You could be looking at a three-month to one-year relationship. Oh, and don't be squeamish about disclosing personal or potentially embarrassing information.

is going on with your case.

"Most people come in with a limited set of facts," Villasenor said. "Can we win? Or am I going to lose this thing? Many times we can't provide that information, but we can give general opinions."

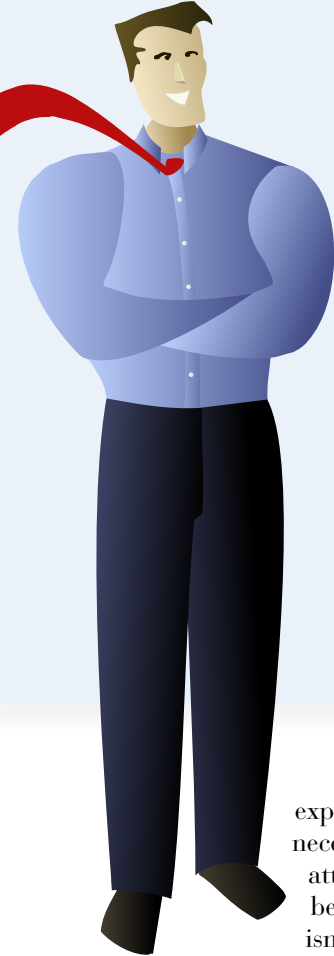
Once formally retained, the attorney can dig further into the case.

"We don't want to give them a false sense of security," Villasenor said. "It's not helping anybody."

But you should be prepared with questions to ask the attorney you are meeting with. For example: How many situations similar to mine do you handle in a year? How do you bill your clients? How much will it cost to represent me? How long is this going to take?

Going down your checklist and gathering the information from the attorney will only make the final decision easier.

## Questions to ask prospective attorneys

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- ✓ What are your areas of specialization?
  - ✓ How many cases like mine have you handled before?
  - ✓ What was the outcome of the cases?
  - ✓ Will you be the only attorney who works on the case? If not, who else will work on it?
  - ✓ How will you bill for this case?
  - ✓ How much will my case cost?
  - ✓ What can I do to improve my chances if success, or to keep costs lower?
  - ✓ How will you keep me informed about the progress of my case?
  - ✓ If you are unavailable, who can I speak to about my case?
  - ✓ How long will the case take to resolve? What is the expected timetable?

expensive? Not necessarily, but an attorney that may not be as highly regarded isn't necessarily going to charge less.

If you have clear goals, you will more than likely be able to save money on fees.

As you think about working with an attorney, remember to consider the firm size. There are advantages and disadvantages. For example, while solo practitioners may be lower in costs, a small or midsize firm may have a more focused specialization in the area you need help with.

The attorney needs to know everything to better understand and address the issues surrounding your case.

"We try to tailor the fee arrangements to the specific case and client," Villasenor said. "We try to give the client the best option for them."

The next step is talking about fee structure and then following up with a proposal. You will not get any free legal advice in the consultation. It just doesn't happen. If it does happen by accident, lucky you.

Most attorneys take this time to identify all the parties involved in your case. If it is a loan, what bank are we dealing with? Have a good description prepared of what

### Making the final decision

For the attorney, work hours have not decreased despite the recession. Hot practice areas in San Diego are heavily tied to the state of the economy. The focus of the work has shifted a lot in the last six to eight months, Jurgensen said.

"There always is ongoing bankruptcy and creditor work — it's gigantic right now," he added. "That is the reality."

The same goes for people who have distressed loans. Problems such as foreclosures weren't common a year ago, but now a flood of people find themselves in that situation.

The best advice attorneys can give is to avoid hiring someone you aren't comfortable with.

"Don't be afraid to walk away from a bad attorney," Jurgensen said. "There are good attorneys out there, and you can find them."

Look for an attorney engaging in charity or volunteer work, said Gordon Levinson of Levinson Law Group in Carlsbad.

"You want someone that is a positive role model in society," he said. "It's a gauge of character."

A good attorney will give you free consultation time and a clear understanding of fees to be paid and costs involved up front. Any good attorney will answer your questions. If they are evasive about things you're asking, get out of there. An attorney's job is to be an advocate.