

Keeping Legal Costs Down

Not everybody who hires a lawyer has worked with attorneys before. Lawyer fees can be somewhat of a mystery to the uninitiated. Here are some tips for keeping your legal fees down.

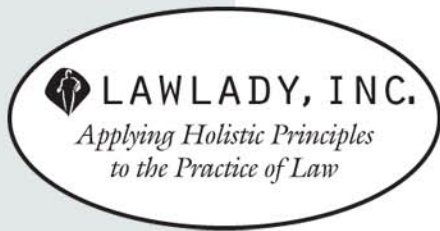
Unless you are on a flat-fee billing system, your attorney will charge you by the hour. You get more for your money when your attorney works on your case in large segments of time rather than working on your case in very small increments over many days.

High fees often occur when your lawyer is making many phone calls in your case during the day, and the calls come in at different points in the day. Often times, a lawyer charges a minimum amount no matter how short the call. For example a lawyer might charge a minimum of 0.2 hours for each phone call, even calls that take a minute. Five one minute phone calls can add up to an hour's worth of time. You want to know about minimum phone call charges in advance.

It is more economical for you if your lawyer addresses all of your questions in one sitting, rather than willy-nilly through out the week. You might want to save all your questions and then do one email or phone call a week to your lawyer, rather than in smaller contacts. The lawyer can respond to your questions at the same time that lawyer drafts any necessary letters or legal documents that are needed in your case.

Another way to keep the legal fees down is to do more legwork on your case. Oftentimes, lawyers will be dealing with many documents in your case. You will save money and reduce the paralegal and lawyer time if the documents you send to the lawyer are indexed with tabs and accompanied with a legible cover sheet (typed is even better). Making a chronology of significant events can be helpful. Ask if you can put together a rough draft of the fact section of a letter or declaration. I appreciate it when my clients want to do some of the legwork. For me, it shows that the client is interested in moving their case forward and it also shows that they're taking responsibility for getting their life back on track. I'm very happy to allow the client to do some of the legwork if the client is interested.

A third way to keep the legal fees down is to stay familiar with your case. Take good notes when you talk with your lawyer, and keep track of the notes so that you can go back and refer to them. Often I have found myself repeating the same information to a client several times. I understand that the client is undergoing a stressful time in their life when they see me, and therefore might not be digesting all the information that I'm giving them. But if the client takes good notes, the client can refer to these notes later and refresh their memory. That way they don't have to pay me several times to repeat the same information.



To coordinate efforts with your lawyer, it is a good idea to organize a legal file for yourself. This is a place where you store paperwork associated with your case, like correspondence from your lawyer, and notes from your meetings with your lawyer. One of the most costly parts of working with a lawyer is when the paperwork gets confusing and jumbled.

Here is an example of how one of my clients reduced her legal fees by being organized. She would call me often on my cell while I was driving. Obviously I didn't have her file in front me. My client was well-prepared and had all the file materials in front of her. She was able to answer my questions and give me missing information. She had her calculator handy, so she was able to crunch some numbers. By doing this, we were able to move her case forward quickly to settlement, even though I was driving around during a day full of meetings. I was able to make phone calls to opposing counsel without waiting to return to my office. In total, the client's organization probably cut off 30 minutes, of my time. In addition, it allowed us to make a settlement offer earlier in the day, which gave the other side more daytime hours to ponder the offer.

I've found that it is often helpful to let your lawyer know that you are trying to keep your legal fees to a minimum. Sometimes just being aware that you are trying very hard to keep fees down can help the lawyer make subtle judgment calls impacting the bottom line in your case. For example, when I am working with a client who needs to keep very tight rein on their legal budget we will sometimes defer activities that I would otherwise conduct in a file. Occasionally delaying until the last minute possible can result in some activities never being performed.

But beware of being overly cautious or frugal with lawyer time: it's not always best to wait until the last minute. Last minute work product can have errors. Often times, the most successful results come from being very pro-active in your case and doing activities early on to motivate the other side.