

Matching service a legal winner

By GORDON PENNY

Anybody engaged in running a small business enterprise in Australia has to seek legal advice from time to time.

But for many people, going to see a lawyer is a bit like going to the dentist. It costs a good deal of money and, if you're unlucky, it can hurt like blazes. The bottom line, in both cases, is whether you receive the best treatment your money can buy.

This analogy between lawyers and dentists wasn't lost on Melbourne-based barrister and solicitor Mr Yuri Rapoport, who broke new ground at the beginning of July last year by setting up Prime Law Brokers, an organisation that matches prospective clients with a choice of suitable lawyers on a free-of-charge public service basis to make sure clients get the right lawyers at the right price.

Behind the venture was his feeling that it was time for the legal profession to operate more effectively. "Lawyers," Mr Rapoport says, "are generally seen as being a bit archaic. They operate in a stifling environment and live in the Dark Ages. It's time for a change.

"How many people go to six or seven different lawyers to obtain quotes before making their choice? This is both time-consuming and impractical, and potential clients are left with the impression that lawyers are inaccessible and expensive."

Mr Rapoport is well qualified to tackle the problem.

He emigrated to Australia



Mr Rapoport . . . updating the image. Photo by JAMES BODDINGTON

from Russia at an early age and went on to study medical science and law, receiving a doctorate in legal science. He was formerly with the legal firm of Corrs Chambers Westgarth.

His decision to found Prime

Law Brokers met with immediate success. More than 3,000 lawyers from 200 law firms are now on PLB's list and some 7,500 client referrals have been made in the past year.

The operation in Victoria is

now being expanded to service NSW and other States.

Funding comes from a registration fee charged to lawyers on PLB's list plus a referral fee based on a standard 4 per cent commission.

Potential clients first of all approach Prime Law Brokers, which assesses their needs.

"We'll provide some preliminary legal advice to see whether, in fact, they need a lawyer," says Mr Rapoport. "If they do, we refer the matter to a board or panel of lawyers who compete for the work.

"We co-ordinate this competition, giving the client a short list of about five of the most competitive quotes, making sure he or she has an idea what cost any legal advice or action might entail."

He says it is a win-win situation, giving the community better legal service and providing lawyers with more work.

The president of the Law Institute of Victoria, Mr James Syme, calls Prime Law Brokers "a positive form of promotion for the legal profession because of the potential benefit to both lawyers and the community.

"The concept will certainly give some traditionally minded lawyers a wake-up call. They've been able to advertise their services for some years, but how many ads do you see?"

"The time is ripe for something like Prime Law Brokers to succeed in a fast-changing and challenging legal environment," Mr Syme says.