

HOW TO: HOLD DOWN YOUR COMPANY'S LEGAL EXPENSES

Having sound company policies can help your business avoid legal problems, but be sure to hire the right lawyer to assist you

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Paying for legal counsel is one of the costs of doing business. But you can take steps to minimize those costs.

First, "be a good client and get your ducks in a row" before you see a lawyer, says attorney Steven Meckler, a partner with Shoemaker Loop & Kendrick in Charlotte.

That means keeping your documents organized, says John Lassiter, owner of Carolina Legal Staffing in Charlotte. That way, "you'll spend less time with the lawyer. If you bring a box of papers in no particular order, someone will have to sort them, and you'll pay a premium for that."

You can also help prevent legal problems that will require the help — and the expense — of a lawyer, Meckler says. "Follow your work-force policies, and don't create one if you can't enforce it. Read and understand contracts before you sign them. Don't just sign one so you can get the sale."

"It's an ounce-of-prevention approach," says Meredith Jeffries, assistant professor at the Charlotte School of Law. "Many small companies fail to put in the time to develop policies and train their people. Do you have sexual-harassment policies? Are your people trained to avoid discrimination claims? Efforts such as these don't cost a lot, but they can result in huge cost savings in litigation avoidance and judgments."

Adds Meckler: "The best money you spend is the money you spend upfront."

There will always be legal disputes, he adds, but



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Hiring an inexperienced attorney can cost more in the long run, says Meredith Jeffries of the Charlotte School of Law.

responding to them quickly can save you money in the long run. "If you see a storm on the horizon, get ahead of it. Don't put your head in the sand and hope it'll go away."

Once you visit with an attorney, you can still minimize your legal costs by managing the relationship.

"Don't be afraid to engage in business discussions," Lassiter says. "As with any professional service, understand the billing rate and business terms, and find out how fees are collected. Do they charge by the hour or on a retainer basis? Make sure you get the service you need. And realize you're not buying a

TOPTIPS

- **Be well-prepared** when you meet with an attorney to minimize the length of the meeting.
- **Train** your staff well and have enforceable policies in place — and follow them.
- **Seek** a lawyer with experience that's relevant to your needs.
- **Understand** your attorney's fee structure.
- **Contact** the Mecklenburg County Bar's Lawyer Referral Service for an initial consultation with an attorney.

widget — every legal need has nuances."

Jeffries, who practiced in the labor and employment area for 12 years, recommends considering attorneys' expertise and knowledge.

"Get the right lawyer for the job," she says. "A general practitioner or junior associate may have a lower rate, but they may have to do research and so take longer. Be less concerned about the hourly rate than in how long it might take. Don't be penny-wise and pound foolish."

That's not just because of the direct costs. "Time is money, and the faster you can get something resolved, the quicker you can get back to work," says Lassiter, who begins a yearlong term as president of the Mecklenburg County Bar this month.

Jeffries also suggests that you consider hiring in-house counsel on a part-time basis, perhaps for as few as five to 10 hours per

week. You might also look into various legal insurance plans, such as liability coverage for your company's employment practices.

Another option, which will help you with legal matters at a low cost, is the Mecklenburg Bar's Lawyer Referral Service. For a \$50 fee, you can receive a 30-minute consultation with an attorney the group matches you with, based on the type of legal question you have. Go to www.mecklenburgbar.org for details.

"They will provide you with a good match, and you may choose to engage the attorney for more services," Lassiter says.

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