

CITY OF HOUSTON GUIDE TO SELECTING ACCOUNTANTS & LAWYERS



CITY OF HOUSTON
OFFICE
of
BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY



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MISSION STATEMENT

The Office of Business Opportunity is committed to creating a competitive and diverse business environment in the City of Houston by promoting the growth and success of local small businesses, with special emphasis on historically underutilized groups by ensuring their meaningful participation in the government procurement process.



ACCOUNTANTS

This document provides guidelines and referrals for choosing an accountant. Choosing the right accountant is an important step for your business. Investing time upfront by researching will help you find an accountant well suited to your businesses' needs. The following are basic guidelines and questions that you may want to consider when conducting your search, as well as resources for referrals.

- Since there are many specialty areas in accounting, financial statement preparation and tax filings, make sure the accountant or firm you choose can handle all of your needs. Ask if they are familiar with the issues facing your type of business. Have they handled clients in your line of work before?
- Do you need a big or small firm? Will you be more comfortable with the name and prestige of a larger firm even though you may be getting junior, less experienced people working on your business? Or would you be better served at a smaller firm where the partners handle your account? There is no right or wrong answer; it is just a matter of preference.
- What type of relationship are you looking for? Are you looking for them to provide financial planning, help writing a business plan, to introduce you to potential clients, create systems for you, handle payroll, or do you just need them to prepare a tax return and year-end financial statements? Not all accountants/firms are set up to handle the day-to-day financial management of a company.
- Ask for references from clients in your industry and/or in your size range. Remember, a good reference does not mean that the firm will be able to meet your specific needs. It is also important to check the references of the actual accountants who will be handling your business. Check their qualifications. You should find out their educational background and whether they are a member of professional organizations such as the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA).
- These organizations require continuing professional education and therefore ensure your accountant will stay current with the latest accounting and tax changes.
- Will the firm/accountant add value to your business? Will they map out a long-term financial strategy or big picture for your business? Can they refer business to you?
- Is the firm's fee structure acceptable to you? Will you be paying a fixed fee for service or an hourly rate?

Once you have done your research and have identified several accountants, you should interview them. By doing so, you will make sure you feel comfortable talking with them and that they have the expertise to assist you with your particular accounting issues. To identify possible pool of accountants to interview:

- Ask friends and family for recommendations
- Ask other business owners in the same line of work for referrals
- Do an internet search on the firm or accountant
- Call professional associations for lists of members

REFERRALS

- The State BAR of Texas: www.texasbar.com
- The National Association of Small Business Accountants: www.smallbizaccountants.com
- CPA Directory: www.cpafinder.com
- Listing of tax professionals by state and geographic areas: www.taxdirectory.com/

LAWYERS



This document provides basic guidelines for selecting an attorney as well as a list of legal resources. A business owner is faced with many legal issues in the course of doing business. Some of these issues may be simple to address while others more complicated. Some common legal issues you may need to address include:

- Deciding on your business structure
- Contract preparation, interpretation and negotiation (including leases and financing agreements)
- Regulatory compliance (including zoning, permits, licenses, etc.)
- Insurance issues
- Intellectual property issues
- Employment issues

While many owners think they can save money by handling these issues on their own, they often find out that the cost of not seeking professional advice ends up being far greater than the money they were trying to save.

SELECTING AN ATTORNEY

Selecting an attorney that is a good fit for your needs is one of the most important decisions you can make for your business.

TO FIND AN ATTORNEY, YOU MAY WANT TO:

- Inquire with your trade association for local referrals
- Ask business colleagues for referrals
- Do an Internet search, go to your local bar association or Chamber of Commerce for a list of attorneys or firms (a referral obtained here needs to come with an indication of the specific level of expertise) Once you have done your research and have identified several attorneys, you should interview them. By doing so, you will make sure you feel comfortable talking with them and that they have the expertise to assist you with your particular legal issues.

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO ASK:

- How does their fee structure work?
- What is their experience with handling the sort of legal issues likely to arise in your business? Is this someone who will be able to provide you with added-value services as you grow the business?
- Are they familiar with your industry's practices?
- Are they able to give you a list of sound references?

HOW TO USE THE ATTORNEY YOU SELECT:

- Be prepared (written list of issues/questions and copies of all documents) when meeting
- Be very clear who is to do what and when it is to be done by
- Always ask for explanation until you understand (if necessary, ask for the advice to be in writing, even though this may cost more)
- Verify that the firm or individual is in good standing with the local bar association



LEGAL RESOURCES

FIND LAW

Provides attorney listings
Website: www.findlaw.com/business.html

MARTINDALE-HUBBELL LAW DIRECTORY

Specializes in finding lawyers for small businesses
Website: www.lawyers.com

WEST LEGAL DIRECTORY

Provides an extensive listing of lawyers
Website: www.lawoffice.com

NOLO SMALL BUSINESS LAW CENTER

Website: www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/small-business

LAWHELP.ORG

Assists people with low and moderate incomes find legal resources.
Website: www.lawhelp.org

MARTINDALE HUBBELL.COM

A legal network that includes basic practice profile data on virtually every lawyer in the U.S. and Canada, detailed professional biographies of leading lawyers and firms in 160 countries, and links to law firm websites and more.
Website: www.martindale.com

PRO BONO LEGAL SERVICES

Sept 11th and other needs
Website: www.probono.net

THE PEOPLE'S LAWYER

Website: www.peopleslawyer.net

TEXAS BOARD OF LAW EXAMINERS

Phone: 512-463-1621
Website: www.ble.state.tx.us

THE FOUNDATION CENTER LIST OF PRO BONO ATTORNEY SERVICES

Website: www.fdncenter.org

AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION

Website: www.americanbar.org



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For more information, visit www.houston.tx.gov/obo or call 832.393.0600



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