

BUSINESS @BIZ

PAGES D6-D7

CLASSIFIED D13

D2 THE TORONTO STAR

BUSINESS TODAY

Legal Line offers 'fabulous public service'

ANTREE DEMAKOS is a lawyer and Ian Levine is a telecommunications whiz.

Both 36 and married to each other for 10 years, the two wanted to combine their skills to bring free legal information to anyone who needed it.

The result is Legal Line, a non-profit venture launched earlier this year. It's a fabulous public service.

Can you incorporate a business yourself? What is a universal life policy? When can a landlord evict a tenant? What can be patented? Who is eligible for workers' compensation benefits? What if your employer doesn't pay you?

For answers to these and 1,000 other questions in 30 areas of law, you can consult Legal Line by telephone or fax (416-929-8400) or on the Internet (www.legalline.ca).

By next spring, callers will be able to get a free half-hour chat with a lawyer to augment the recorded information.

The Law Society of Upper Canada cancelled a similar service, called Di-

**ELLEN
ROSEMAN**



al-A-Law, in 1997. That service used an older technology (cassette tapes) that allowed only one caller to hear a message at a time.

"Our technology is state of the art," says Levine, 36, who spent a decade installing corporate voice-mail systems at Kayenell Communications Inc. "We're handling 1,000 calls a day, and no one ever gets a busy signal."

The Web site gets the same traffic, with 1,000 hits a day, while fax-on-demand is not as popular.

Legal Line can't yet match the volume at The Canadian Lawyer Index (www.canlaw.com), a popular Web site that gets 500,000 hits a month. It's

a for-profit service that makes money from advertising.

"I've handed out 25,000 free referrals to lawyers in five years," says Kirby Inwood, a Toronto advertising executive who started the Web site partly to air his grievances with the legal system.

Inwood hit the news after he married Tanya Sidorova while on a 1985 holiday in the former Soviet Union. He waged a public fight to bring her to Canada, but was convicted of assaulting Sidorova and their Russian-born son, Misha, shortly after they arrived in Toronto.

The Canadian Lawyer Index has a strong point of view, urging consumers to file complaints against lawyers or judges and to fight back if a lawyer's bill is too high.

As Inwood says: "I get a lot of flak from lawyers who don't like what I'm doing. The entire field needs a radical cleanup."

Legal Line is different, providing just the facts, without a hint of opinion, and staying deliberately non-commercial.

Neither Demakos nor Levine has

taken a salary since setting up their non-profit company, Legal Information Ontario, in 1994.

The couple, now expecting their first child, relied on the power of persuasion to raise the \$2 million needed to launch the service.

First, the two enlisted 300 top lawyers in Ontario to work for free, writing about topics in each's area of expertise.

"We cherish those 300 lawyers," says Levine, who signs two or three more each week, including noted Toronto criminal lawyer Clay Ruby.

"They're Legal Line, not us."

Second, the two found people with pleasant voices to record the information (again for free).

"They took six months to read it all in," Levine says. "It was just like a set of encyclopedias."

Third, sponsors were recruited to cover the costs and add credibility. (The two didn't want the service to be controlled by lawyers.) Sponsors include Bell Canada, AT&T Canada, Nortel Networks Corp., Apple Canada Inc., Dell Computer Corp. and Canada Post Corp.

Fourth, Demakos and Levine printed 1.5 million Legal Line Guides and gave them out free at law offices, police stations, libraries, recreation centres and social-service agencies.

To widen the distribution, Canada Post will deliver 3.5 million guides next, one to every home in Ontario (again for free).

Legal Line callers spend an average of 18 minutes on the line, listening to at least three topics and skipping from one to another using three-digit codes.

The service is greatly needed, judging from the response.

"I get 80 telephone messages a week from people, some in tears, saying 'thank you, bless you, we couldn't get answers before,'" Levine says.

"I've never heard from anyone literally crying in gratitude before. It's made me a different person."

Ellen Roseman's column appears Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. You can reach her by writing Your Business c/o The Toronto Star, 1 Yonge St., Toronto M5E 1E6; by phone at (416) 945-8687; by fax at (416) 865-3630; or at erosema@thestar.ca by e-mail.