

## Wills and the Internet

When people today need information, many of them turn to the internet. Powerful search engines make it easy to type in a few key words and find what it is you're looking for. So it's not surprising that when people want to find something out about wills, they turn to the internet. Most people—I think—are aware that they should take the information they receive off the internet with a grain of salt. They should also keep in mind that old saying that if something sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

So what might a person find on the internet if they were to browse for information about wills? We were wondering at our office, so we spent a little time surfing the net to see what's out there.

We punched in "wills Edmonton" to one of the more popular search engines and got 341,000 hits. At the top of the list was an advertisement to create a legal last will without costly lawyer fees. That sounded pretty good, so I looked into it further. Very quickly I was asked a few very basic of questions: my name, and the names of my spouse and children. After entering the information (OK—I used a fictitious name—you don't really think I'd give out sensitive personal information to some unknown internet site, do you?) the website showed me the first page of the document it had produced. To see the entire document, I would have had to purchase a license. The license fees varied depending on the options chosen, but in comparison to the fees that I typically charge, the licensing fees were downright cheap.

So what's the catch? The biggest catch of them all is probably the disclaimer on the bottom of the page that says that the information being provided is not legal advice. **Unlike a website, I don't hide behind disclaimers.** I give legal advice to people about planning their estate. To make sure I'm giving them the right advice, I ask questions. Lots of them. And based on the answers I get, I ask a lot more questions. My interview technique is a lot more dynamic and responsive than that of an internet site that steers people towards a one-size fits all document. I find out what's really going on in a person's life and try to give them appropriate legal advice. Websites don't.

Here are some other questions to ask: Who operates these websites? From where are they being operated? Does the website provider have any particular knowledge about Alberta law? Often it's not clear who the operators of these websites are, or where they are from. In contrast, I am a real person. I have an office in Edmonton, and I am licensed and insured to practice law in Alberta. I don't try to keep my identity a secret. I have professional and ethical obligations. If I screw up, I can be sued. I have unlimited personal liability. Not too may website providers can make those claims.

The internet can be a good source of information about wills and estate planning, but a person has to look beyond the sites that promote cheap alternatives to expensive lawyers. In fact, if you are looking for information that is accurate,

reliable and relevant to people living in Alberta, you should check out the websites of law firms in Alberta that provide estate law services. You will often find more than just advertising material. And if you are looking for a lawyer who provides estate law services, the internet can be a great way of finding one.