

## Ahead of the Curve

This former solo lawyer built his thriving practice on a website and a hunch

BY LYNDA EDWARDS

**G**REGORY SISKIND WAS JUST a 27-year-old associate in 1994 when he gave his colleagues at the largest firm in Nashville, Tenn., two reasons to think he was daft.

He left to set up a solo immigration law practice, and he decided to use the Internet—which many lawyers viewed primarily as a high-tech toy for college kids—as his chief marketing tool.

But Siskind felt he was onto something. Some pizza restaurant chains were making national news back then by going online, and he believed a killer website could work for him, too—even though he didn't know of any other solos with websites or even any local law firms with an online presence.

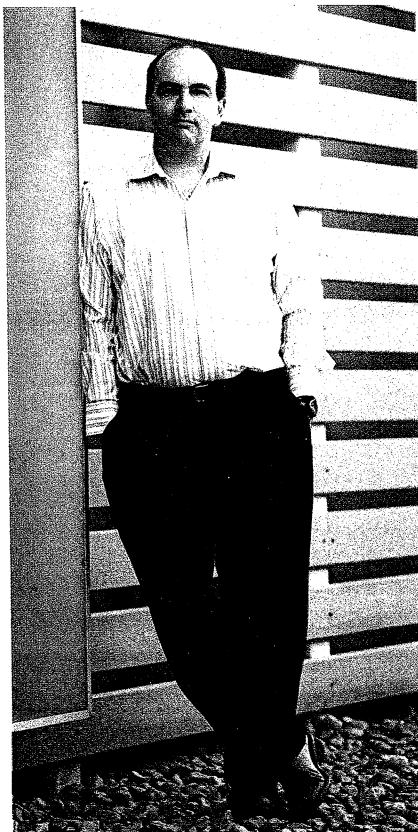
He created Visalaw.com to offer news and information tailored to appeal to a client base he felt was undervalued and underserved: rural universities with foreign students, high-tech firms hiring engineers from overseas, and hospitals in need of foreign doctors and nurses.

He also created an online health care newsletter that became wildly popular with foreign doctors, nurses and radiologists who wanted to work in the United States and with American hospital administrators desperate for the foreign professionals who could ameliorate staff shortages.

At the time, he recalls, “immigration was not a hot issue and no one thought it would generate enough work.”

Today, Siskind Susser Bland boasts 20 attorneys and offices in New York City, Las Vegas, Atlanta, Toronto, Beijing, Tijuana, Buenos Aires, Memphis and Nashville. Siskind's client list includes doctors, athletes, musicians and entertainers.

“We recruited our most famous client, Cirque du Soleil, through the



Gregory Siskind has a diverse client base.

Internet because Cirque's in-house immigration lawyer was reading our news links and started e-mailing me,” Siskind says.

### FINDING A NICHE

SISKIND HAS SPENT MOST OF HIS LIFE ahead of the curve. He graduated magna cum laude from Vanderbilt University at the age of 19. He earned a law degree at the University of Chicago and immediately began working at Nashville's Waller Lansden Dortch and Davis.

“They had me working on corporate law and let me do some immigration cases because they knew that was my real interest,” Siskind says. “There was—is still—a stereotype that all immigration lawyers' clients are very poor. We do work for people who don't earn much money.

But from the beginning, I thought health care professionals could be a large segment of my clients.” Siskind writes a blog, and many weeks he figures he spends as much time writing online as he does talking with clients.

And thanks to two full-time employees, Visalaw.com stays loaded with links to news bites, court decisions, publications, government forms and even flow charts outlining the process for obtaining various types of visas. Siskind also has a full-time writer who files her copy from Israel. (She moved there from Nashville when her husband got a job in the Middle East.) There's so much information posted that he estimates a visitor who printed out all the material offered might end up with 50,000 pages.

Most nights he works on the site from home, starting at 9 p.m. and ending who knows when. “I set aside the early evening so I'll have time with my wife and three daughters,” he says. He recently debuted the first issue of his online newsletter, *Visalaw Fashion, Arts and Sports*, which also has a companion blog. The inaugural arts newsletter featured Yo-Yo Ma's congressional testimony about difficulties the cellist had getting visas for Iranian musicians. (Siskind loves representing musicians, and his personal hero is Leon Wildes, the immigration attorney for John Lennon during the 1970s when the Immigration and Naturalization Service tried to deport the Beatle.)

Although he is thoroughly immersed in the Internet, Siskind still marvels over its miraculous reach, which even stretches into war zones.

People from 150 different countries have visited his website. “We had someone in Sudan click on recently!” Siskind exclaims, then adds wistfully: “We haven't had anyone from North Korea or Cuba. But maybe one day they'll click on us.” ■