

Immigration lawyer creates niche for himself on Internet

BY MARK MINTON ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

MEMPHIS — When Greg Siskind quit a large corporate law firm to hang out a shingle as an immigration lawyer, colleagues warned that he'd never make it — there just weren't enough immigrants.

Siskind, whose firm now boasts offices from Toronto to Atlanta and recently purchased roomy new quarters in Memphis, says billings have tripled in the past three years, thanks to the rising tides of immigration and globalism. Along the way, the Internetsavvy lawyer seems to be making himself the Matt Drudge of immigration.

His law firm's Web site, which dispenses immigration news alongside practical articles on topics such as how to get a visa, counts more than 200,000 visitors a month from 60 countries. Meanwhile, Siskind says, his weekly immigration newsletter has some 40,000 subscribers, which is more than all but four of the newspapers in Arkansas, according to figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulations.

Few lawyers short of John Grisham can claim such readership. But the affable 38-year-old Siskind calls the growing popularity a product of the times. "Until recently," he wrote in the latest "Siskind's Immigration Bulletin," "most people reading this newsletter were in a select group. Most people paid little attention to the discussion of immigration law and policy.

"Suddenly, immigration is the hottest topic in the country."

Siskind does legal work for several Arkansas hospitals that rely on foreign doctors and also advises a Delta Regional Authority visa-waiver program that funnels more foreign-born doctors into rural areas of Arkansas. He says his clients range from global corporations, such as International Paper Co., that shift talented employees in and out of the country, down to vegetable pickers who come illegally for jobs.

Usually, he has to send the illegal aliens away without help.

Despite a popular sentiment that Americans wouldn't mind immigrants if only they would enter legally, Siskind said he has to tell nearly all the aliens he sees that, "99 percent of the time, there is no way that they can do it the legal way."

But illegal aliens could become Siskind's bread and butter, depending on the changes Congress makes to the laws, he said.

With 13 lawyers in five cities, the Siskind Susser law firm is one of the 10 largest immigration practices in America, and easily the largest in the region.

Among high-profile clients, Siskind said he represented Peter Frampton when the British-born rocker decided in the wake of 9/11 to become a naturalized U.S. citizen, and served as outside immigration counsel for Cirque du Soleil, clearing hurdles for a stream of Olympic athletes hired for performances.

Siskind debuted his Web site, www.visalaw.com, and newsletter in 1994 as marketing vehicles to bring in clients and fees. The free electronic newsletter started as a monthly. "There wasn't as much news to report," says Siskind, who now puts out an average of 25 to 40 pages every week. The current issue is 50 pages. Readers include government officials, immigrants, court officials, fellow immigration lawyers and some 300 reporters.

Siskind said he also recently activated a Web log to keep up with fast-moving immigration developments "and get the news out as quickly as possible."

Last week, the blog featured a dispatch that Siskind filed from Washington, where he was lobbying for the Senate's comprehensive immigration bill. At 5:52 a.m. Wednesday, before most of his readers awoke, Siskind filed a bulletin with the news from a Tuesday news conference: growing optimism among Congressional leaders that a deal on the immigration bill will be reached by the end of May.

When new versions of the bill surface, Siskind scrambles to post a summary of the changes. He published a section-by-section breakdown of the bill's 615 pages. "I got it up within hours of the draft being released," he

said.

After all, other immigration law firms are also publishing the news on Web sites and blogs similarly designed to attract attention and business. Lawyers, often averse to advertising themselves through traditional methods, are fine with online marketing, said Kevin O'Keefe, whose Seattle-based LexBlog sells blogging platforms tailored to lawyers. Although fewer than 1 percent now have blogs, he said the number is growing.

To supply content, Siskind has a "News from the Courts" columnist — a Russian immigrant who is a lawyer in Mississippi and writes about topics such as a recent asylum case involving a Chinese woman who fled to the United States after she was sold into marriage.

At the recent immigrant rally in Memphis, Siskind snapped photos on his cell-phone camera to enliven his report. He occasionally claims a scoop. "I've had things leaked to me over the years by immigration officials," he said. But most of his content is not original. Like the Drudge Report, it is material compiled from elsewhere.

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