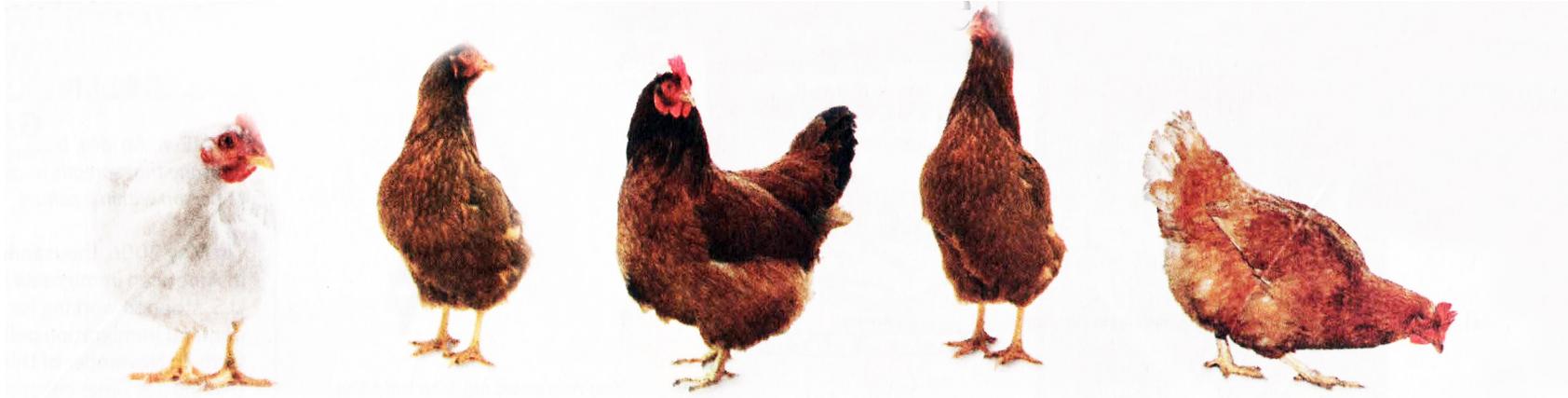


TRANSACTIONS

Legal advice? That'll be two Rhode Island reds per hour



With economic conditions deteriorating, the barter system makes a comeback

TRACEY TYLER

LEGAL AFFAIRS REPORTER

During the Great Depression, when clients couldn't pay for his services, lawyer Jerry Cooper struck a deal.

Chickens.

"There were a lot of farmers in the area who were losing their farms to power of sale or having debt-collection problems, and they needed legal advice," said Cooper's grandson, James Morton, a Toronto lawyer.

"They would say, 'How about five chickens?' and he would say 'Okay.'"

Today, with lawyers' services beyond the reach of the middle class and the economy worsening, many Canadians needing legal advice are also employing creativity.

Blending 1930s pragmatism with 21st-century technology, they're using the Internet to shop for lawyers – often at the online equivalent of a garage sale – and, like Cooper's clients, even attempting to barter for legal advice.

Jacqueline Sharp, a Toronto personal trainer who's planning to start a wellness business offering health and nutrition advice, recently posted an ad on Craigslist, the online classified service where surfers can find everything from used snow blowers to vegan discussion forums.

She was looking for a lawyer who could answer "between 10 and 20 questions," including whether she should incorporate her business.

Sharp offered to swap legal advice for several hundred dollars of her professional time.

"I'm building a business right now, so I don't have the money to spend on a lawyer," she said in an interview. Sharp's ad, posted in the "legal services" section, caught the eye of Toronto lawyer Young Lee, who occasionally glances at Craigslist.

He considers online appeals for legal assistance a sign of the times.

BARTER continued on 1D 2

TRANSACTIONS

How an episode of Boston Legal spurred a search for online help

“Unfortunately, law has become the sort of sport of kings these days, in terms of affordability,” Lee said in an interview. “You find people who rather desperately need good legal services, and they either think they can’t afford it or genuinely can’t afford it.

“So they resort to these sorts of measures to look for what they think might be a cheaper alternative,” he said.

Over the past half-century, the legal system has tried to improve access to justice through such things as legal aid, class-action lawsuits and non-profit agencies for organizing pro bono services. But there’s still an unmet need for easy and affordable access to a lawyer’s advice.

Lee, who describes himself as “old-fashioned” and doesn’t advertise his own law practice online, has yet to enter into a bartering arrangement with Sharp; from time to time, he’ll just answer questions from people whose legal problems are relatively simple.

Some people look for lawyers online because they don’t know where to turn or

they’re intimidated by the thought of walking into a law office, thinking it will cost a lot of money.

“There’s all this hearsay that lawyers start at \$400 an hour,” said Shauna, a Toronto computer technician; who asked that her last name not be used.

She found help through a new website called dynamiclawyers.com, the brain child of Toronto lawyer Michael Carabash.

Putting his degrees in law and business administration to use, Carabash created what he calls “a more refined version” of Craigslist, without the “clutter” of online personals or ads selling rhinestone brooches.

His website, which launched last month, is devoted exclusively to matching lawyers and people with legal problems. While Craigslist charges what it calls below-market rates for ads, members of the public can use dynamiclawyers.com free of charge, and lawyers can also sign up on a free trial basis.

“I wanted to focus on making it easy and affordable, not only for users, but for lawyers to get



Michael Carabash is President of dynamiclawyers.com

on the site,” Carabash said in an interview.

Would-be clients can have their requests posted publicly on the website or emailed specifically to lawyers specializing in the type of law their problem involves.

Shauna turned to the

service after missing payments on her line of credit and finding herself hounded by a collection agency.

When the agency’s representative told her a court judgment would be taken out against her, she remembered watching a similar situation

unfold on an episode of Boston Legal and thought she must surely have a chance to first tell a court her side of the story, Shauna said.

“I thought, ‘Something’s wrong here’ – but I was still scared,” she recalled. After posting a synopsis of her problem on dynamiclawyers.com, Shauna had two prompt replies from lawyers who told her, among other things, she had a right to file a statement of defence.

“What I like about (the service) is it’s anonymous and you’re not sitting in a lawyer’s office, feeling like you have to hand over your first-born,” she said. For Morton, the phenomenon isn’t just a symbol of how technology has changed since his grandfather’s day, with people routinely going online to search for information.

“I think it also does reflect the fact that legal costs are simply out of range for most middle-class people and, unfortunately, most lawyers are either not able or willing to take the steps necessary to try to make legal services available,” he said.