

My Lawyer Life



A BLOG FOR LAWYERS

SO, YOU WANT TO START A LAW FIRM?

Starting a law firm can be overwhelming, so I thought I would share my start up checklist with you. Hopefully this will help you along your journey!

Initial Questions

- Why are you starting a law firm?
- What type of law will you practice? What solution are you offering?
- Who is your ideal client? Who will you be marketing to?
- In what counties do you want to practice?
- How much capital do you have to invest?
- What do you want your business name to be?
- What type of entity do you want to form?
- If LLC, S-Corp election?
- What will your mission statement be? Firm values? Slogan?

Business Formation & Compliance

TEXAS SECRETARY OF STATE

To form your business, you must first start with the Texas Secretary of State.

Secretary of State Home Page: <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/>

Secretary of State FAQs: <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/corp/generalfaqs.shtml>

- Create your business name.** Perform a corporate name search to make sure your name is still available.

SOS Direct: <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/corp/sosda/index.shtml>

Name Filing FAQs: <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/corp/namefilingsfaqs.shtml>

- File Certificate of Formation**

Business & Non-Profit Forms: https://www.sos.state.tx.us/corp/forms_boc.shtml

Business Filing Tracker: <https://webservices.sos.state.tx.us/filing-status/status.aspx>

Payment Form:

<https://webservices.sos.state.tx.us/forms/payment.pdf#search=payment%20form>

Fee Schedule: <https://direct.sos.state.tx.us/help/help-corp.asp?pg=fee>

Note: You MUST submit a change of address form each time you move your office.

INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE

□ Apply for a FEIN number with the IRS

You will need a FEIN number for tax purposes. Federal taxes are due annually on April 15th. As you earn more money, you will eventually make quarterly pay-ins.

FEIN Application: <https://www.irs.gov/businesses/small-businesses-self-employed/apply-for-an-employer-identification-number-ein-online>

Employer & Tax Information: <https://www.sos.state.tx.us/corp/tax.shtml>

TEXAS COMPTROLLER OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

You will need an account to complete your state franchise tax. State Franchise Tax is due annually on May 15th.

Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts Home Page: <https://security.app.cpa.state.tx.us/>

Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts Log In Page: <https://security.app.cpa.state.tx.us/>

Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts Forms:
<https://comptroller.texas.gov/taxes/franchise/forms/index.php>

Change of Mailing Address or Phone Number Page: <https://comptroller.texas.gov/web-forms/franchise/changeaddress/>

CENTRAL APPRAISAL DISTRICTS

You will be mailed information on how to complete your business inventory tax. Business Inventory Tax (also known as property tax or ad valorem tax) are due annually on April 15th.

PCI COMPLIANCE (Credit Card Payments)

PCI Compliance is due annually each year.

ControlScan Merchant Portal Sign In:
<https://smartscan.controlscan.com/security/index/0/overview>

Step by Step Guide: <https://supportcenter.lawpay.com/hc/en-us/articles/360029834931-PCI-Compliance-Step-by-Step-Guide>

IOLTA COMPLIANCE (Trust Account)

IOLTA Compliance is due annually.

Texas Access to Justice Foundation: <https://www.teajf.org/attorneys/compliance.aspx>

Attorney Log In Page: <https://compliance.teajf.org/attorney/login.aspx>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Office of the Governor's Small Business Handbook:

https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/business/2019_Governors_Small_Business_Online_Handbook.pdf

Texas Workforce Commission: <https://www.twc.texas.gov/businesses>

U.S. Small Business Administration: <https://www.sba.gov/>

The Basics

Create your business logo

One of the first items you need to take care of is creating your business logo, and there are several avenues you can take to do so. If you want to design it yourself, I suggest using Canva to make your creation. If you want someone else to send you options, and work with you to create the design, I suggest LogoPerfecto.

Register a domain name

You can register your domain name with most website services, so that you can control your domain and website in one place.

Choose a website service

The next item on your list will be choosing a website host. There are multiple options for this, but I personally recommend GoDaddy. I have had a great experience with them so far. Through the GoDaddy platform, I can control my domain name, my website, and my blog. Plus, I can schedule social media posts and send out newsletters. It also gave me a year free of a professional email address as well as a year free of SmartLine, their professional phone application.

□ **Professional email address**

Your website platform will usually also host your professional email address based on your domain name.

□ **Professional phone number**

There are multiple options for creating a professional phone number. The free option is to use Google Voice. This gives you a professional number and allows you to take calls and make calls through a phone application. You can even text! GoDaddy's SmartLine application is extremely similar, but it costs about \$100 per year. Another option is for Ruby Receptionists to host your phone number as well as perform as a virtual receptionist service.

□ **Professional fax number**

Depending on your line of work, you may need a professional fax number. The two easiest options for this are eFax and Hello Fax. They both work the same way by giving you an online portal to log into and send/receive faxes.

□ **Business mailing address**

Deciding what type of office space to get depends on your needs and funding. To start, I suggest initially using a virtual office space to conserve costs. You can find virtual office space options by doing a quick google search in your area. Another option is to rent out an individual office space in some sort of business center. This cost ranges from about \$450-800 dollars depending on the size you want. If you want an even bigger office space, one option is to share office space with another tenant. This cuts the cost in half and allows you the benefits of a larger office space.

□ **Business Equipment**

It is important to invest in good business equipment as quickly as possible. It took me about a year to save up enough money to purchase a desktop and heavy-duty laser printer for my home office. It took me another year to save up enough money to purchase an additional desktop and heavy-duty laser printer for my work office.

○ Computer

I started out using just my laptop as my computer. I eventually ordered two monitors so that I could use additional screens with my laptop. This was good, but it led to multiple tech issues. Thankfully, I have the Best Buy Total Tech Package which allows for free diagnostics and repair on my laptop. Eventually, I saved up enough money to purchase an HP Pavillion All-In-One Desktop Computer for each office. Now that I use a desktop for my daily tasks, my laptop has ceased having issues. I can honestly say that I love my new desktop

computer. It works well and even has a pop-up privacy camera (so you can close it when finished with your zoom call). It also includes a wireless keyboard and mouse.

- Printer

I started out with a three-year old ink jet printer. I quickly found out that this printer was not up to the task. As things moved forward, I found out that I could only print ten pages at a time, and only one-sided. Investing in a new laser heavy-duty printer saved my life. I currently use the Brother MFC-L8900CDW All-In-One Laser Printer. It is a wireless printer that can also scan documents to the cloud. I have had no problems thus far, so I definitely recommend it. If you want, there are also additional letter trays available for purchase. The downside is that toner is a lot more expensive than ink. It costs about \$600 total every time you need to replace the toner, but you only have to replace it maybe twice a year (depending on your usage).

- Scanner

I initially invested in a desktop scanner since my ink jet printer was not great at scanning in documents. I heard they were incredible and worth the investment. Unfortunately, I constantly had to uninstall and reinstall the software because the scanner would stop working. It wasn't until later that I found out about wireless desktop scanners. I purchased a Fujitsu ScanSnap iX1600 for both offices and it was a great investment. It wirelessly scans my documents to the cloud with little effort. I highly recommend this scanner.

- Office Supplies

You will want to be sure that you have proper office supplies when starting your firm. This includes computer paper, legal pads, portfolios, sticky notes, stamps, staples, paper clips, binder clips, file bands, file folders, file labels, and red robes among other supplies depending on your usage. I found that in addition to basic office supplies, I also needed a heavy-duty stapler and heavy-duty staples. You can purchase these items for about \$20-30 on Amazon. Before I was able to install fiber internet in my home office, I also used a Wi-Fi extender which plugs into your computer's USB port. In addition, I invested in some generic wireless ear buds for both offices.

- Reference Materials

I also purchased reference materials that I knew I would use in my practice. For me, this included the Texas Family Code, Texas Rules of Civil Trials, and Family Law Handbook. I also purchased an online subscription to the Family

Law Practice Manual for form templates. For those of you who practice family law, I recommend these products.

Financials

□ **Banking**

Getting your banking set up properly is essential to starting your law practice.

- Create an IOLTA Trust Account

This is the most important banking item to complete. Be sure to follow the Texas Access to Justice Foundation's instructions to ensure compliance.

How to Open an IOLTA Account:

https://www.teajf.org/attorneys/how_to_open_iolta.aspx

Texas Access to Justice Foundation IOLTA Information:

https://www.teajf.org/attorneys/what_is_iolta.aspx

Financial Institutions: https://www.teajf.org/attorneys/choose_a_bank_cu.aspx

IOLTA Notice to Financial Institution & Foundation Form:

https://www.teajf.org/attorneys/docs/IOLTA_Notice_Form.pdf

State Bar of Texas Guide to IOLTA Accounts:

<https://www.texasbar.com/Content/NavigationMenu/ForLawyers/ResourceGuides1/TrustAccounts/default.htm>

A Lawyer's Guide to Client Trust Accounts:

<https://www.texasbar.com/Content/NavigationMenu/ForLawyers/ResourceGuides1/TrustAccounts/GuidetoTrustAccounts.pdf>

- Create an Operating Account

You can create an operating account at the same financial institution you create your IOLTA account in. Make sure that the two accounts are linked, but not co-mingled.

- Order Checks for Operating Account

Depending on your practice, you may need to order checks for your operating account. I don't have to write checks often, but often enough to warrant ordering a batch.

- Apply for Funding

If you don't have sufficient capital you may want to apply for a small business loan, a business credit card, and/or a business line of credit.

Payment Software

Another item you need to consider is how you will accept credit card payments. Most case management software allows you to use their own secure portals. If not, you might consider using LawPay or QuickBooks.

Bookkeeping Software

When starting your practice, bookkeeping software is essential. You want to make sure that this software also syncs with your case management software. For instance, QuickBooks can sync with Clio or MyCase.

Accountant / Bookkeeper / CPA

When I first started my firm, I choose to *not* have an accountant/bookkeeper/cpa, but, rather, do it all myself using QuickBooks. This was not the best option, because I didn't know much about what I was doing. I highly recommend investing in a CPA upfront so that you don't have any mistakes in your bookkeeping or on your taxes. I use Lomness CPA. This company provides monthly bookkeeping and annual tax preparation for \$200 per month.

Excel Sheets

Even if you hire a CPA, you will still want to keep track of your budget and expenses. I highly recommend creating both a budget sheet as well as an income and expense tracker in excel.

Software & Services

Case Management Software

Case Management Software is vital to your law practice. I personally recommend MyCase, because it comes with so many amazing features. It keeps your case and client information organized, allows you to easily track your time and expenses, offers an electronic signature platform, and gives each client their own client portal. Other options for case management software include Clio or Practice Panther. I suggest that you take advantage of the free trials these case management softwares provide so that you can decide which one suits you the best.

Microsoft 365 or Mac Equivalent

This really doesn't need to be said, but you will need to have the Microsoft 365 applications (Word, Excel, etc.) or a Mac Equivalent to get any work done.

□ **Zoom / Microsoft Teams**

With the new way of the world, downloading Zoom and Microsoft Teams is a must. The good thing is they are free to download. However, Zoom does give you an upgrade option if you wish to take it.

□ **Adobe PDF DC Pro or Equivalent**

Please be sure to have pdf software loaded on your computer. I don't mean a pdf reader, but actual software that allows you to sign documents, comment, etc. I use Adobe PDF DC Pro and it costs me about \$17 per month.

□ **Malpractice & Cyber Insurance**

You must have malpractice and cyber insurance if you run your own practice. If you hire any employees, you need to make sure the insurance covers them as well. I use the Texas Lawyers' Insurance Exchange which is about \$600 annually for your first five years of practice (after that it increases). Check it out here: <https://www.tlie.org/>.

□ **Cloud Storage**

I personally use DropBox for my cloud storage. They have a professional option which is great for solo practitioners. However, once I started adding people into my practice, I found I needed to upgrade to DropBox Teams, so that I could easily share team folders.

□ **Anti-Virus Protection**

Trust me when I say it is worth it to have some sort of anti-virus protection on your computer. I use Norton 360 with LifeLock Unlimited Plus. This allows me to download anti-virus software and free VPN on my laptop, both of my desktops, and my phone. It also provides a password manager extension. With the LifeLock portion, they monitor my bank accounts, credit cards, and other credit information.

□ **Calendar & Checklists**

If it isn't obvious, you will need to have a digital calendar, and I also suggest having digital to do lists. If you like your iphone's calendar system, use that. Otherwise, Google Calendar and Google Keep are great options. I personally use my iCal as my digital calendar and Google Keep to host my digital to do lists. I also use Asana (similar in manner to Trello) to digitally organize my client to do lists. It helps me visualize where I am with each case.

□ **Appointment Scheduling**

Appointment scheduling software is amazing. I use Calendly which allows me to create a homepage with different events that people can schedule. It syncs with iCal, Google

Calendar, and even Outlook Calendar. You can customize the options so that people can only sign up for one event per day, for a certain length of time, include buffer time between events, etc.

□ **Virtual Receptionist**

When you first start out, you may not need this option. However, this was one of the first “luxuries” I invested in. I was so overwhelmed by the constant phone calls, and I was unable to dedicate time to return people’s calls. With a virtual receptionist program, people who call in to my law office can speak to an actual person, schedule consultations, and leave messages which are emailed directly to me. The only downside is that you have to port your phone number to them. When you do this, you are unable to call out of your phone applications. However, I first used Ruby Receptionists which has their own phone application to place outbound calls through a different number. Down the line, I needed to cut costs somewhere, so I invested in Alert Communications instead which also offers me a free 24/7 translation line. I have also heard that Back Office Betties is another good option.

□ **Additional Software**

I also have some “luxury” software that I feel benefit me greatly, so I want to share them with you.

- Grammarly

Grammarly is a spell check software that you can use when writing emails, online, or even on your phone. I have found that it comes in clutch and is more accurate than the built-in spell check options.

- Password Manager

Another software I highly recommend is a password manager software. I use LastPass which can be added as a Chrome Extension. However, if you have anti-virus software like Norton or McAfee, you may already have a password manager software to download.

- Notarize

If you find that you or your clients need to notarize documents often, I suggest using notarize.com’s virtual notary service. Just be sure that the document you are notarizing can be notarized online. For example, you cannot notarize a will online.

- HelloSign

If you don’t use MyCase as your practice management software, you likely don’t have access to electronic signature software. In that case, I recommend using HelloSign to send requests for electronic signatures.

- Canva

If you want to spend time creating social media images, banners, infographics, ebooks, or even business cards, I suggest using Canva. I have had a great experience with them, and they offer a lot of templates to choose from.

- Date Calculator

It's always good to have a date calculator handy to determine deadlines, etc. I use this site: <https://www.timeanddate.com/date/dateadd.html>.

Marketing, Advertising, & Referrals

Design Your Website

Design your website yourself or hire someone else to do it. I personally use GoDaddy.

Order Promotional Materials – Business Cards, Return Address Labels (or a stamp), Pens, etc.

I use VistaPrint to order my business cards and other promotional materials, but there are several options available.

Create an email signature

I first create my email signature in word, then save it as an image. I then paste the image into the email signature settings in outlook. In my email signature, I include a link to my scheduling page, basic information, special logos (i.e., Texas Bar College, Texas Pro Bono College), and a confidentiality statement.

Create a letterhead template using your firm's logo

I put my law firm's logo at the top of the page along with my business address. Then at the bottom I have my signature block. In addition to creating a letterhead template, I also suggest creating a legal document template with your signature block.

Create Public Profiles

Create Public Profiles so that it is easier for people to find you! Some places you can create a public profile include the State Bar of Texas, various Bar Associations, Avvo, Justia, and Nolo. It is also important to sign up for Google My Business so that you can be located on a map.

□ **Create Social Media Profiles**

Social Media can be integral in driving traffic to your firm. You will want to create social media profiles for your firm on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#). You might even consider creating a [YouTube](#) channel.

□ **Begin Advertising Campaigns (requires purchase)**

Paid advertising can be a good place to start if you are having trouble driving traffic to your firm. With [Google Ads](#) and [YELP Ads](#), you can set a cap on how much you can spend per month on advertising.

□ **Sign Up for Referral Services**

A great way to get clients is to sign up for various referral services. There are a variety of referral services you can sign up for, but my favorites are the [State Bar of Texas Lawyer Referral Information Service](#) and the [Dallas Bar Association Lawyer Referral Service](#).

□ **Sign Up for Legal Insurance Programs**

Legal Insurance Programs are great for getting referrals. The downside is that you have to take clients according to their fee schedule. In some cases this is worth the advantage, but in others it is not. Check out [ARAG](#) and [Texas Legal](#) for yourself and see if it is something you want to do.

□ **Sign Up for Pro Bono Work**

Email brehenyw@lanwt.org to get on the email list for the Dallas Volunteer Attorney Program (DVAP) referrals.

□ **Submit Court Appointment Applications**

If you are interested in court appointments, don't forget to submit your applications annually.

□ **Apply for Memberships**

Being a member in various organizations is crucial to success. I personally recommend the following memberships:

- Texas Bar College (30 CLE credits annually)
- Texas Pro Bono College (75+ pro bono hours annually)
- Texas Young Lawyer's Association
- Dallas Bar Association
- Dallas Association of Young Lawyers
- Dallas Women Lawyers Association

□ **Take Headshots**

Whether you take professional headshots, or have your friend take the photo, you need a headshot or two in your back pocket. It is also great to have these pictures for your website.

□ **Update Your Resume**

You want to make sure you have a resume handy at all times. You should also consider drafting a Bio Page that could be submitted with your resume.

□ **Scan Your Driver's License ID & Bar Card**

In some practices, you have to include your driver's license and/or bar card with various forms. Having them pre-scanned is a must.