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Deals Made in a Garage: How Florida Attorneys Are Adjusting to the Pandemic

As most attorneys surpass the second month of working remotely, they are working on mastering the little things that are now necessary to continue closing deals.

By **Michael A. Mora** | April 08, 2020 at 05:41 PM



(l-r) Thomas Ringel, Jodi Colton, Stefan Chin, and David S. Henry. Courtesy photos

Tom Ringel has been closing deals in an unusual place: the garage of his Miami law firm.

It's one of the ways the real estate attorney and founding shareholder of Markowitz Ringel Trusty + Hartog is adjusting to public efforts to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

"They close the windows and turn the AC on, so they are comfortable," Ringel said. "I stand outside of the car with gloves and a mask, and call them from my cellphone to explain what they are signing. They listen on their car speaker and ask any questions that they might have."

The technique allows both parties to practice proper social distancing. So far, Ringel has closed seven transactions this way. He has several more planned in the next two weeks.

New issues

Jodi Colton, a partner at Brinkley Morgan, is opting for mobile notaries. But she's discovering some logistical speed bumps.

"Does that still work in spite of the stay-at-home order?" Colton said.

The mobile notary has to be close enough to see the person signing the document, yet far enough to observe social distancing guidelines. They've been effective for her firm so far, as they also provide online notary services for certain types of documents. Yet Colton fears what the future could bring, especially when time is a factor in closing a case.

"Sometimes we need two witnesses for the notary," Colton said. "And ... frankly, I haven't figured out how we are going to accomplish that one yet."

Among the legal documents that fall within this scenario are premarital agreements and wills. It is something, Colton said, she will have to figure out soon, as she expects to face it within the next few weeks.

In the meantime, if someone has an urgent need to sign a document in a case, Colton has a third option: Allow the client to come into her office, while taking into account the 6-foot social distancing safety precaution.

Technological safeguards

Using online services to close deals requires precautions taken in advance.

Stefan Chin, a partner at Peckar & Abramson, regularly prepares documents for filing online, so the transition has been seamless. As does David S. Henry, who is a partner at Kelley Kronenberg. They each credit having a strong information technology team.

Henry advises other attorneys to coordinate with their IT department ahead of time. Otherwise, a lawyer could run the risk of discovering faulty technology at a key moment, such as near the closing of the deal, in a deposition or during a hearing.

“The expectation is to provide superb client service,” Henry said. “You’ll be surprised that someone has an older laptop that is not compatible, or somebody else needs an update, or someone else needs this or that.”