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**ARE CONSUMERS BEING BAMBOOZLED BY PROMISES OF QUICK AND CHEAP  
LEGAL SERVICES?**

**David Green, CEO at MTA Solicitors advises:**

The impending Legal Services Act 2007 that comes into play during the next three years is expected to result in a real transformation of the legal profession as we currently know it. The key aim of the Act is to increase consumer choice as well as the quality of legal services available to them. In line with this change in law, so-called 'supercentre' law firms will begin to establish themselves alongside more traditional local high street law firms offering quick and cheap legal services. With such dramatic change anticipated, does increased consumer choice automatically mean increased quality of choice?

Under the Act, (being dubbed "Tesco Law"), large companies such as, supermarkets, will be able to offer legal services directly to their customers. This could happen by the organisation acquiring a law firm or by employing lawyers in-house. Arguably, to some extent large legal retailers have their place; as they can offer legal services in a cost effective manner across a wide range of disciplines. However, many legal professionals believe that the emergence of these 'supercentre' law providers will put consumers at high risk of receiving sub-standard legal advice.

Armed with increased choice, consumers are likely to find themselves completely bamboozled with numerous promises of quick and cheap legal services, ranging from 'bucket shop' conveyancing to an off-the-shelf 'quick-fix' divorce. However, consumers should beware that buying from a one-stop-shop with the intention of paying the cheapest possible price, may represent a false economy.

In short, quality costs; and it is essential that legal advice and support comes from a representative that is familiar with your needs and has the relevant experience and expertise required to succeed. The concern is, that using legal representatives from 'supercentre' organisations (which can be based anywhere across the country) or might have completely irrelevant experience, consumers will not receive the level of help that they need. It may appear quick and cheap in the short term, but long term it could prove to be the opposite.

The Internet has seen a wave of new entrants to this 'bucket-shop' approach to legal services, with some players quoting 'fixed-fees' as low as £99 for services like conveyancing. Having been enticed by the initial fee, the online application is likely to pile on the extras, such as; shared ownership fees, mortgage fees and stamp duty fees. As such, the quote could escalate way beyond the initial £99 to anything in excess of £500.

Rule seven of the Law Society Code of Conduct makes it clear that solicitors and firms representing them who advertise their services, must comply with The British Code of Advertising Practice and more importantly, that solicitors must be "clear and up front with fees". Solicitors and their agents have a duty of care to express fees clearly when displaying them in advertisements. Failure to do so could result in a breach of rules.

It's important that consumers consider these pitfalls when shopping online for legal services. A successful conveyancing department for example, must offer the client a first-class personal service at a competitive price. Attempting to provide the service by using non-qualified staff with little or no experience and, an over-reliance on a case management system will inevitably lead to problems. Buying a house is one of the biggest purchases a person will ever make in their life. As such, everyone should be entitled to have one person allocated to their case, to whom they have direct access. Service and price is a major factor for the consumer during a difficult economy but consumers must be aware that obtaining the cheapest possible price does not always constitute good service.

Most legal cases require the added extras that already come with a package from a local practice such as; face to face consultation and benefits of expertise in the local area. This cannot be provided by the new 'supercentres'.

Smaller law firms and partnerships that have existing community knowledge and specialist experience, will inevitably cost more than the new 'supercentres', although they provide a more personalised and efficient service overall. Often, the small to medium law firms employ lawyers with highly specialised professional experience in dealing with particular legal issues or against particular parties, which can only be achieved through years of servicing a community. This will obviously come with a larger price tag and, with these proposed changes coming at a time when the Government is reducing access to legal aid consumers may feel they have no other choice than to take the cut-price option, regardless of the lack of knowledge.

Due to increased competition, many local firms are already offering fixed price products for the most common requirements, thus remaining competitive alongside the large retailers. Now is the perfect time for consumers to start shopping around for legal services, especially with the local law firms now competing with larger retailers. If low cost, reliable alternatives cannot be found, the public are likely to end up representing themselves, which is far from ideal in any legal case.

When it comes to choosing legal services, good value is important and consumers should rightly expect it.

Top tips on choosing legal services:

- When researching a law provider search its name on the Internet - this will bring up any negative publicity and likewise, any positive news which will help with the decision process.
- Research what experience a law provider has had overall and whether they have any experience in your case area – or you risk paying for a lawyer to research the subject in the first instance.
- Find out exactly who will be handling your case and who to contact with any problems.
- If your case is a local dispute, using a local law firm with knowledge of the area rather than one situated across the country could be a better choice.
- Visit the Law Society website [www.lawsociety.org.uk/](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk/) for further information on a law provider's history and past cases.

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**About MTA Solicitors:**

Established in 2001, MTA Solicitors provides a wide range of legal services including corporate law, commercial litigation and dispute resolution (including arbitration), commercial property, IT and e-commerce, banking and finance, business immigration, trusts, wills and probate, trust litigation and contentious probate.

MTA Solicitors clients' span across many different business sectors in the UK and overseas; including foreign law firms, offshore trustees, major UK and global insurance companies, domestic and foreign banks, transport operators, local authorities, agents and service providers, and individuals.

MTA has offices based in London and Kent and employs over 250 lawyers. Please visit: [www.mtasolicitors.com](http://www.mtasolicitors.com) for further information.