

Top Ten Questions to

For a financial professional in the divorce niche, the basic information to get from a new client is simple – state of residence, length of marriage, gross salary, and the like. But to truly get to know a client's situation and needs, it is important to dig a little deeper. Here are ten questions to ask new divorce clients.

1

What assets do you own?

This is a basic question that should be top of mind for a financial professional. Clients can easily come up with a list of bank accounts and real estate, but be sure to press them further. What retirement assets do they own? Stock options? Art, jewelry, or antique collections? A thorough inventory of marital assets goes far beyond liquid cash, so make sure clients understand the breadth of what you are looking for.

2

What do you owe?

Along with knowing what a client has, it is important to know what a client doesn't have. This includes all credit card debt and outstanding loans. Be sure to get specific details on any mortgages. Knowing that a house is "underwater," for example, can greatly change the financial outlook of the client.

3

Could your spouse be hiding assets?

It may sound unlikely, but assets have a way of disappearing after divorce proceedings begin. For example, a spouse may transfer assets to a third party or create false debt in order to skew their financial picture and, therefore, avoid paying a large settlement or alimony. If your client suspects that their spouse is hiding something, start by checking the couple's tax returns for the past five years to find any elusive assets.

4

What is most important to you?

While neutral financial professionals should never tell a client what they should negotiate for in a divorce, it is important to understand what a client finds most important. For example, do they wish to remain in the marital home? Knowing that will help you structure different settlements and future predictions.

5

What are you willing to give up?

Like #4, be sure not to steer a client in any particular direction. However, this question can be useful to get the client thinking about sacrifice. Divorce settlements rarely work out with everyone completely happy, so it is good to prepare a client for this harsh reality. After all, it is often far more expensive to continue fighting your ex over a particular asset than it is to just let it go.



Ask Divorcing Clients



How do you expect your custody arrangement to be structured?

Assuming the couple has children, it is important to know who the children will be spending the most time with. Factoring in child support payments can affect the way a financial picture comes together. Be sure to check your state's child support guidelines so you can take realistic numbers into account.

How would you describe your financial situation?

More important than the specific content of the client's answer is the general feel of their description. Are they naively assuming that their lifestyle will continue unchanged? Do they assume (perhaps incorrectly) that they will receive spousal support? This question gives great insight into how the client is thinking and feeling and how they will react to different proposed settlements.

Do you expect to pay or receive alimony?

Though fewer and fewer divorce settlements include alimony, many people still assume that it will be part of their own settlement. Gauging a client's expectation around spousal support – whether they expect to pay or receive it – can be useful in creating your own models of their financial future.

Where are you in the divorce process?

For better or worse, most people will seek out a family lawyer first in their divorce process. They may not think to bring in a financial professional until further into the process. When you are called off the bench, take a moment to understand how far the client has gotten. Have they gathered and catalogued information for their financial affidavit? Or do they not even know what a financial affidavit is? Taking time to understand this enables you to tailor your communication, advice, and instructions to the individual you are serving.

What questions can I answer for you?

This might be the most important question you can ask a new client. Divorce is a confusing, emotional, overwhelming experience, and it is most clients' first time going through the process. Many clients simply don't know what to expect and a little Q&A with an expert can go a long way toward making them feel more in control of their divorce. Have some patience and compassion for your clients and try to answer their questions as thoroughly as possible...without giving legal advice. The extra support will be invaluable to your professional relationship.