

Fastcase Offered Free to VSB as Member Benefit

The Virginia State Bar will begin offering online legal research software as a free benefit to all members of the VSB on March 1. The VSB has contracted with Fastcase to provide the member benefit for three years, to include national coverage, unlimited usage, unlimited customer service, and unlimited free printing—at no additional cost to bar members, as a part of their existing membership dues.

The benefit is national in scope. It includes cases from the U.S. Supreme Court from 1 U.S. 1 to present, the U.S. Courts of Appeal from 1 F.2d 1 to present, federal district courts from 1915 to present, federal bankruptcy courts from 1 B.R. 1 to present and courts from all fifty states back to at least 1950.

In addition, the Fastcase service adds cases, statutes, regulations, constitutions, and court rules from all states and from federal sources. Where the official versions of these materials are already available for

free on the Web, Fastcase brings them together for easy access on the same site.

The service benefit is Web-based, so members will have no discs to buy or software to download. It is accessible anywhere lawyers have Internet access, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—at the office, at home, or on the road. The service is updated daily, and includes both official citations and citations to commercial reporters, both at the header of the case and within the case for “star pagination.”

“Lawyers have been looking forward to this online research service, and we are pleased to be able to provide it as a new benefit for members of the Virginia State Bar,” said VSB President-elect Karen A. Gould, who served on the committee that solicited bids for the contract.

“The service will give all Virginia attorneys access to case law and many other

Fastcase at-a-glance

Sign up—Go to the Virginia State Bar Home Page at www.vsb.org and click on the Fastcase logo.

Tutorial—Fastcase provides a five-minute online overview of how the research tool works. See <https://www.fastcase.com> and click on “online demo.”

FAQs—For questions about searches see <https://fastcase.com/Corporate/Questions.aspx>.

Customer Service & Tech

Support—Phone 1-866-773-2782 (1-866-77-FASTCASE) 8 A.M.–8 P.M. (M-F) or e-mail support@fastcase.com.

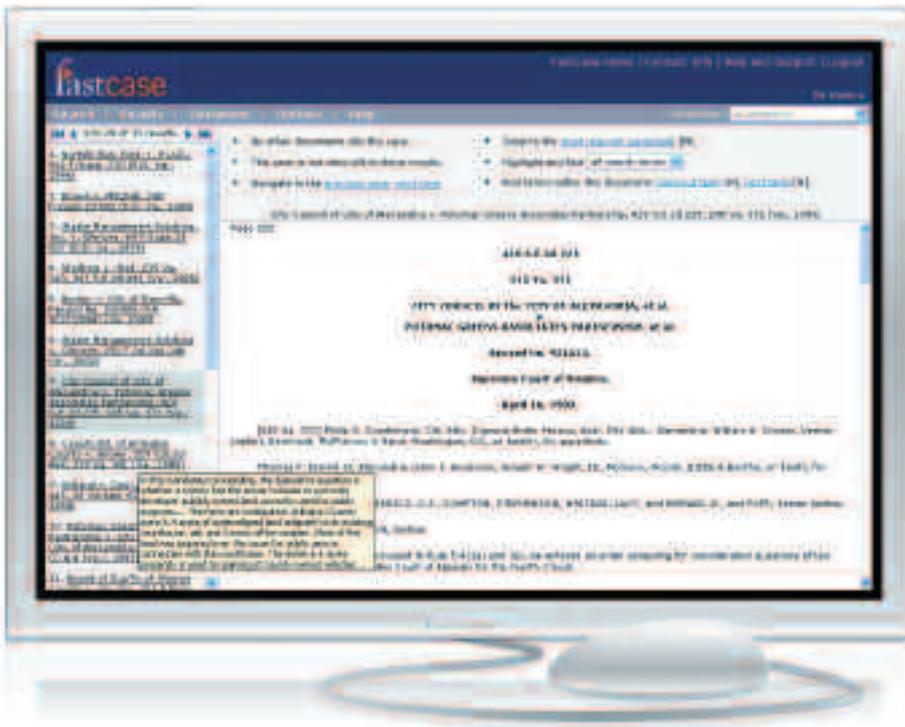


resources they need to effectively represent their clients. The service is paid for out of their annual bar dues, with no additional fees.

“Ultimately, the people who will benefit are the public who turn to Virginia lawyers for help.”

Local Roots

Fastcase was founded in Alexandria in 1999. One of its cofounders, Ed Walters, has been a member of the VSB since 1996. “Since we started six years ago, Fastcase has grown into one of the largest case law databases in the world, but it’s so gratifying to offer it to our home jurisdiction in Virginia, and at no cost to users,” Walters said.



Sample document obtained through Fastcase.

Members of the VSB were some of Fastcase's earliest subscribers, and the company has exhibited at the bar's Annual Meeting in Virginia Beach, and at Continuing Legal Education seminars across the state.

The company was started when Walters was in practice in the Washington, D.C., office of Covington & Burling. "One of our larger clients needed legal research for a project, but asked us not to charge them for the expensive services our firm used," Walters said. "When we couldn't find an affordable alternative, another lawyer at the firm and I decided to leave and build one ourselves." A few months after that project, Walters (who is the company's chief executive officer) and Philip Rosenthal (the company's president) started Fastcase, which now has more than 155,000 subscribers worldwide.

"Fastcase levels the playing field between small firms and large firms, providing everyone the kind of access to the law that only the largest firms have enjoyed," Rosenthal said. "Now all lawyers, from the biggest firms to the most remote solo practitioner, will have the entire national law library right on their desktops."

"We have launched similar benefits in Florida, Louisiana, Iowa, and Massachusetts," Walters said. "In those states, Fastcase has improved the quality of the practice of law by giving lawyers access to more of the law, providing smarter search tools, and allowing lawyers to do more research for pro bono and nonbillable work."

The Fastcase service is constantly expanding, and it plans to include a larger offering of Virginia materials as part of the service, as well as other materials to expand its libraries.

Using the Fastcase Benefit

To use Fastcase, members will go to the VSB Web site (www.vsb.org) and click the Fastcase logo. They will be prompted to



Searches begin with this screen.



Searches can be narrowed by jurisdiction.

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sign in using a password, which the VSB provides to each member. The service supports terms and connectors (or Boolean) searching, natural language searching, and searching by citation. Searches use terms and connectors familiar to users of most commercial legal research systems, so no new training should be required to use Fastcase. In addition, there is a five-minute tutorial available on the site, which is an introduction to Fastcase and a good brush-up course on legal research.

Some of the standout features of Fastcase are its “best-case-first” ranking of search results, which works like Web search engines such as Google, Yahoo! or MSN Search, with the most relevant results at the top of the list. In addition, users can decide for themselves which cases are most relevant, sorting by date, how often the case has been cited in other cases, its relevance score, or even alphabetical order. Fastcase displays information about the cases in a results list, including the citation and either the most relevant paragraph or the first paragraph of the case. “These features help people find the needle in the haystack by sorting the haystack to put needles first,” Walters said.

Fastcase also offers dual-column printing of cases, in Word, PDF or WordPerfect-compatible Rich Text Format. The service also offers phone support and a real-time chat support service. “People really like the chat support,” said Rosenthal. “It offers fast, authoritative answers to questions, right where people need the help.”



Search results can be sorted by relevance, date and other criteria.

The Fastcase service has been very popular in the states where it has been offered. Florida Bar President Alan B. Bookman said that the service provides his bar’s members with “immediate access to free legal research, the cornerstone of a lawyer’s ability to provide competent, quality legal advice.” Michael W. McKay, a past president of the Louisiana State Bar Association, called it “our most important member benefit ever.”

Louisiana lawyers had more reason than ever this year to like the service. After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, many lawyers in the state had to evacuate their

homes and offices. Although many are only now returning, one thing they did not have to leave was their law libraries, since all members of the state bar had online access through Fastcase, which set up a special link when the state bar site was offline.

“There are so many benefits to having an online research service,” Walters said. “It’s a great complement for lawyers who already have a legal research system, and a terrific alternative for those who have been waiting for the right service at the right price.” ☺

VIRGINIA LEGAL AID AWARD

Presented by the VSB Access to Legal Services Committee, the recipient of this award is an outstanding legal aid attorney. The nominee must be a member of the VSB and an employee of a legal aid society that is licensed by the VSB to operate in the commonwealth of Virginia. The deadline for the receipt of nominations is Monday, April 10, 2006. See www.vsb.org/awards.html.