

SPECIAL FOCUS: GOING SOLO

'Vakeel' Singh Employs Novel Self-Marketing

▲ By Tom Nadeau

MARYSVILLE — His blue turban makes this lawyer pretty easy to spot in a crowd, but then, getting singled out in a crowded field is, after all, the soul and substance of the creative self-marketing program Kulvinder Singh has developed.

Singh, admitted to the bar this year, currently applies his promotional ideas to his own law practice centered in downtown Marysville, but other ambitious attorneys might benefit by studying his methods and possibly adapting some of them to their own purposes; for his ideas are, if nothing else, novel and sound like as much fun as they would be work.

Singh's multi-step program calls for identifying your assets of talent and training, developing a plan, finding the right milieu in which to practice, choosing the right combination of legal services to offer, getting a television talk show, running for public office, plying the free media for all its worth and spreading the word around the spice stores until the clients start lining up.

After that, it only stands to reason, success will follow for any industrious attorney who is willing to "return telephone calls promptly, keep clients informed of their cases and be a zealous advocate for his client's interests," to lift a reminder from Singh.

While that is admittedly a vastly simplified overview, a quick look at Singh and the story of how he came to put his dreams to work may convince skeptics that this genial Punjabi-speaking lawyer is onto something.

Kulvinder Singh, now 30, was born in New Delhi, India, Nov. 3, 1966 — a date that happened to coincide this year with a Punjabi Day parade in Yuba City marking the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first Sikhs, Hindus and Muslim East Indians in the Great Central Valley of California. It was a gala event.

"They had a parade for my birthday, and 35,000 people came," observed Singh, whose ever-present sense of humor is well honed from frequent use.

Singh came to the United States as a little boy of four when his father, a mechanical engineer, got a U.S. work visa and a job with a private engineering firm in New York. His dad now works for the City of New York.

"And my mom worked, too," he said. "She was a file clerk for 20 years."

So Singh grew up and went to school in the New York boroughs — "I went to kindergarten in Queens and high school at Stuyvesant" — which may help to account for his thoroughly Americanized elocution.

Singh went to City University of New York in Queens and early on he determined he wanted a life in the law. Which meant going to law school. Which raised the question of which one.

Always thinking ahead, always marketing in advance, Singh realized that his law school choice and its location would probably be a factor in where he would ultimately practice law, so there were economic angles to calculate.

After some measuring and eyeballing and some extensive if this, then that-ing, Singh settled on Sacramento and McGeorge School of Law, which he attended before transferring to the University of Northern California Lorenzo Patino School of Law, where he earned a juris doctorate.

"McGeorge was a good law school and Sacramento was halfway between Stockton and Yuba City," Singh said.

The strategic logic of this odd geographic fact would be crystal clear to members of the Punjabi-speaking community.

Stockton is home to the oldest Sikh community in the United States (the oldest in North America being Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada) and Yuba City was the first major agricultural economic center for Sikhs.

The Yuba-Sutter region was said for a time to have one of the densest per-capita concentrations of Sikh religionists in the western hemisphere. Moreover, in recent

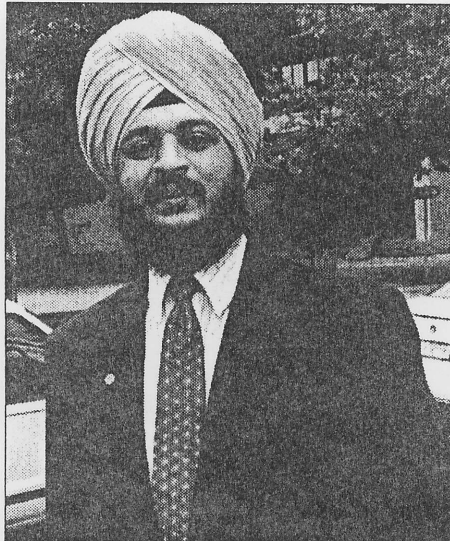


PHOTO BY TOM NADEAU

Kulvinder Singh's unusual approaches to marketing his solo practice include hosting a public-access TV show and running for Marysville City Council.

years, west Sacramento has had one of the fastest growing Sikh congregations anywhere.

Estimates vary, but one common calculation puts the whole Central Valley Punjabi-speaking population at more than 50,000. Figuring at least one legal problem per person — dissolution of business partnership, workers' compensation claims, personal injury, auto collision or whatnot — that pencils out to a viable market.

Again, always thinking ahead, Singh also studied business at Sacramento State University while in law school. His master's thesis was on, "Marketing Legal Services in the 1990's: Promoting a Small Sacramento Law Firm."

To accomplish this he and colleagues in the graduate business program studied the marketing plan of a small Sacramento firm. He also examined the legal background underlying the current professional rules in California regarding lawyer advertising and current trends in marketing legal services in Sacramento and around the country.

His conclusions? Well, among other things he concluded that, "with the assistance of marketing staff and personnel, attorneys and law firms can learn to more effectively use marketing tools..."

But most importantly, he concluded that, "with growing competition in the business of professional legal services, law firms of all sizes need a dignified and effective marketing plan to reach prospective clients."

So when Singh was sworn in this year and launched into the law business, he landed on his feet and running.

His office at 417 Fourth St., Marysville, puts him in the center of a vibrant East Indian community where he is the only Punjabi-speaking, observant Sikh. It also puts him in easy reach of the Sacramento courthouse where another active Punjabi community often finds itself going to resolve the many legal entanglements of life.

To serve clients in Sacramento he has an office arrangement worked out with a fellow attorney.

Furthermore, Singh said he has identified the legal areas in which he wants to practice. They include workers' compensation, personal injury, real estate, evictions, criminal defense, probate, trusts, estate planning and divorce.

What about immigration?

"The people in the spice store do that," Singh said with a chuckle. Before there was a Punjabi-speaking lawyer, local Sikhs would find what help they could through paralegals and people with some acquired knowledge.

According to Singh, individuals at established businesses in Yuba City — sari stores, spice stores, travel agencies — have in the past and continue to help with the routine tasks associated with green cards and immigration.

"They refer the tough questions to me, and I refer them to San Francisco," Singh said.

One such tough question recently revealed a cultural problem that non-Indians might find odd. As Singh explained, a Sikh man came to the United States on what is called, "a fiancee visa." That is, he had been engaged to marry a woman here through the brokered marriage arrangements still observed in India. But when he arrived, he changed his mind, Singh said.

"When he got here he decided he wanted the younger sister instead," Singh said. "I referred him to immigration lawyers in San Francisco." As it turned out, the answer to that tough question was relatively simple. All the shopping-around groom had to do was get another fiancee visa, this time for the right one, preferably taken out in India.

Following his own advice, the energetic Singh also adopted some unique methods of getting his name out before prospective clients.

He went to public access channel five in Yuba City where he wangled a weekly hour show on law and current affairs, aimed at, but not limited to Punjabi speakers. The program, called "Vakeel Kulvinder Singh" (Lawyer Kulvinder Singh), comes on at 9 p.m. on Wednesdays.

"I don't give legal advice on the air, just talk about things," he said. "But it gets my name out." The show doesn't really pay anything, but then, it doesn't really cost much either as an advertising tool.

Another innovative way of getting out the name of Kulvinder Singh is to run for public office, which he did.

Singh ran for the Marysville City Council in the last election and came in fourth in a field of six. Though he lost, he met a lot of people, went to candidate nights, was in two local newspapers and a special election supplement by the chamber of commerce.

A few lawn signs, a little energy and plenty of smiles was about all he put out, so, penny for penny, it was an advertising deal.

The election's top vote-getter spent about \$5,000 for the race and prevailed with about 1,500 votes. Singh got some 550 votes and spent \$300, total.

Big law firms often hire a marketing director at top dollar to sit around and think up plans like this. Singh did it on his own. Other solo lawyers may want to consider using the same template.

"I'm not saying other lawyers should imitate me, and I'm not even saying I should have done what I did," Singh said looking back over this last year. "But what I'm trying to get across is that law is a profession in which you have to get involved."

Involved means actually involved, Singh said. Just "networking" isn't enough. People in the community service groups can tell when an interloper is at a meeting to sell him or herself. That is not enough to win their trust and draw them in as clients.

"They want to see you actually in there volunteering, doing something for them," Singh said.

With the election over, his TV program going full-tilt and new clients coming his way from both the Yuba-Sutter area and Sacramento, Singh is reasonably satisfied that his self-marketing plan is working.