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Bad debt workshops

Recovering bad debts can be a big headache for businesses which is why law firm Furley Page created its interactive workshops to help them find solutions.

The next workshop, in partnership with Kent Invieta chamber of commerce, is being held on 29 April at the Marriott Tudor Park hotel and country club, Maidstone.

It follows the same format that proved so successful with the other three - part seminar, part interactive question and answer session.

Martin Kingman, who heads the debt recovery and insolvency team, said: "Businesses need reassuring that they can prevent problems with debtors if they have the right safeguards in place. The workshop is ideal for credit controllers, financial directors and owner managers who have a direct involvement in managing the firm's cash flow."

Joining him is Furley Page partner and specialist in corporate and commercial law Susan Jennings who will talk about trading terms and how businesses can use them to their best advantage. She will also explain basic contract points which are essential if businesses are to stand a chance of securing payment.

Mr Kingman will focus on debt recovery and credit control in general; risk analysis; the type of information needed from new clients; late payment and interest; effective debt management and recovery, and international trading.

Email maxine@kentinvictachamber.co.uk or www.kentinvictachamber.co.uk

Old-fashioned inventors and bright young internet stars have one thing in common; both of them could lose out by having their ideas stolen.

Most people know that they need to file a patent to protect their invention, but fewer people are aware that they could face a legal challenge over a brand they have built up over many years.

For both groups, help is at hand in the shape of trademark and patent attorneys Graham Watt & Co LLP.

The firm, based in Sevenoaks, Kent, offers the kind of service that too many people wish they had taken advantage of when it is too late.

Alison Cole is the firm's trademark expert and was quick to point out that in our modern, online world, brand is becoming increasingly valuable.

"For many businesses these days, marketing is virtual, trading is online and there is very little that is tangible. The most important asset is brand, and once someone challenges your right to use that brand you really are in trouble."

It's not enough to make sure Companies House recognises

Brand protection

your right to be called Wonder Widget UK or to buy the domain name. If someone else can prove they have been using that brand for longer than you then they could challenge your rights and ultimately harm your business.

It's a complicated area and one that needs specialist knowledge. "It's simpler and cheaper, of course, to talk to us first and register the trademark from day one. That will make sure your hard work in driving recogni-

tion and building goodwill is not snatched away," explained Alison.

Partner Derek Gambell is one of the firm's patent experts and has similar stories about the way ideas can be stolen if inventors don't use professional help when they come up with a new idea.

"A fundamental error is for people to talk to others about their invention before patenting it," he explained. "Once it's out there, it can't be patented."

Tackling staff issues

TimelessTime has been supporting a firm with a member of staff on long term sick, writes Sue Berry, director of TimelessTime.

An instruction was given to the employee about three months ago. They didn't like what they heard and went off sick. Armed with repeat sick notes they have been absent since, stretching the resources of the small firm to the limit.

We discussed the options. We agreed to taking a firm but caring approach, demanding return or dismissal in line with legislation. We then discussed how the firm got to this point. There had been performance problems for the last two years and nothing had been done to address them. Surely there's a message there for every manager: don't let staff issues go unresolved because they always return to haunt you.

Assuming a return to work, we discussed performance management. This is very different to disciplinary action. Disciplinary is used when an employee does something wrong such as stealing, bullying, and ignoring management instruction. Performance management deals with the issues stopping the employee undertaking the job with the aim of bringing them back on track. Reasons for underperformance are many: lack of ability, lack of understanding, lack of training or health issues.

To help staff understand management's need to recover underperformance, a performance management procedure is essential. As soon as someone is identified as underperforming, the procedure should be used to implement a corrective action programme.

GRAHAM WATT & CO LLP

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