

Legal
Ask SCORE

Protect Your Intellectual Properties

Abbreviations and symbols such as “TM,” “SM,” “PAT PEND,” “©,” “®” carry a lot of legal power. They help to safeguard a company’s names, products, services, and designs. As an entrepreneur, you should find out which ones you need and make sure they protect the intellectual properties of your small business.

Trademarks are not the same as patents and copyrights, even though the differences are not widely understood. While there are similarities, they serve different purposes.

According to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), a trademark is a word, name, symbol or device used in business to indicate a source of the goods, i.e. your business, and to distinguish those goods from those sold by another business. A service mark is the same as a trademark, except that it identifies and distinguishes the source of a *service* rather than a *product*.

A patent for an invention grants a specific legal property right to the inventor—“the right to exclude others from making, using, offering for sale or selling” the same invention.

A copyright is harder to define. It is mainly a protection for authors of original works, including literary, dramatic, musical, artistic and other intellectual works, both published and unpublished.

The Internet has transformed the once mysterious process of applying for a trademark into something accessible to anyone willing to spend some time to understand the intricacies and get it right. But while no business skills or special legal knowledge are required to apply, the field is filled with potential pitfalls and wrong turns that could sabotage your trademark filing if you don’t know the intricacies of creating trademarks that can stand up to legal challenges later on.

For example, the application requires that you identify goods or services under specific categories. But misunderstanding these categories and filing too broadly or too narrowly can ruin your trademark and cause problems later on. A qualified trademark attorney can help you avoid such problems.

The U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s Web site at www.uspto.gov provides a wealth of information and resources about protecting your small business’ intellectual properties. You’ll find basic information about trademarks, patents, and copyrights; links to easy-to-follow “How To” guides; and search engines for researching existing trademarks and patents.

To learn more about trademarks and other small business matters, contact America’s free and confidential source of small business mentoring and coaching. SCORE is a nonprofit association of more than 12,000 business experts who volunteer as mentors. SCORE provides free and confidential mentoring to individuals who want to start their own businesses and to current business owners who want to find ways to grow their business and increase profits. All SCORE Volunteers are experienced business professionals. Contact the Norfolk SCORE Chapter to schedule an appointment or, if

you are interested in becoming a SCORE Volunteer, contact us at 455-9338. Visit our website at www.scorehr.org, or email us at scorehr60@whro.net.