LOS ANGELES — Before he starts a mediation, Michael Solner dispenses tried and true advice to attorneys, “There are many ways to skin a cat, and if you think about it, that’s a pretty disgusting concept.”

Solner said that the line makes lawyers laugh and also triggers the process of jumping into a case. Lawyers who have appeared in front of Solner during his two and a half years at ADR Services Inc. say the neutral is an understated, smooth operator who can quickly assess the strengths and weaknesses of a claim.

“He listens first, then digs in, but he is very subtle in his approach,” said Matthew Jay Geragos of Geragos Law Group.

“In talking to the parties for 10 minutes, he sized up the entire case,” said Matthew E. Hess, a sole practitioner, in recalling his mediation in front of Solner. “He could do that almost instantly.”

Added Hess, “He’s smart and understands people, that’s probably the real reason. I’ve seen other mediators that can get it in time but he can get it crazy fast.”

Solner, who charges $525 an hour, said that he relies on his experience in public and private sectors as well as criminal and civil cases, plus a philosophy of “testing your limits” in pursuing a settlement.

The neutral spent most of his childhood in Los Angeles, and was a high school track star who enrolled at the University of Southern California because it had the top track program in the country.

Solner deadpans that talent was the one thing standing between him and an Olympic gold in the 400 meters. He was just the fourth best 400-meter runner on USC’s freshman team and had to drop the sport. “It was a rude awakening,” Solner said. “But you find your limits by testing them.”

Solner has kept up with running, entering marathons and even 50-mile races. As for his non-racing life post-USC, Solner enrolled in the Air Force at the start of the Vietnam War. He spent four years as an electronic warfare officer. “It was a maturing experience,” Solner said.

Solner said he had a positive Vietnam experience. He considered a career in the Air Force, and described himself in an interview as patriotic.

After Loyola Law School, Solner became an assistant U.S. attorney for four years, and fondly recalls the office having seemingly unlimited resources at the time to pursue cases. “We just did what we thought the job needed,” Solner said.

He moved on to become a defense attorney at Thelen Marrin Johnson & Bridges, pursuing mostly professional negligence cases, and then started his own criminal and civil practice before applying to become a judge. Gov. Pete Wilson appointed him to the Los Angeles County Superior Court bench in 1997.

“I couldn’t really afford to take the judicialship until my kids were out of college,” Solner said. But he felt the timing was right for a fourth major career change.

Solner spent his last two years as judge running a settlement court, which, he said, “set me up for where I am now.”

His load consists of about 80 cases a week’s worth of ADR Services Inc. mediators who voluntarily seek his mediation services. He has a neutral temperament, but he definitely controls the interaction.

The neutral said he is able to wrap up most mediations in a day, though sometimes his sessions last well into the night. Solner pushes to see that a resolution is in place before the parties leave for the day. In fact, Solner says what he likes most about the job is the finality of a settlement compared to the appeals and delays that accompanied his bench work.

“Expect him to be forceful where he needs to be,” Hess said. “When we were close to a deal, he was very forceful and the case was settled.”

Said Joseph Fischbach of Fischbach & Fischbach, who had an employment law case before the mediator: “He had a good judicial temperament, but he definitely controlled the interaction.”

Here are some attorneys who have recently used Solner’s services: James Turken, Eisner Jaffe APC; Yolanda Slaughter, Mesriani Law Group; Matthew E. Hess, Matthew E. Hess Lawyers; Joseph S. Fischbach, Fischbach & Fischbach, Benjamin Kacev & David Michaels, Kilometer Partners LLC; Marina K. Fraigun, Fraigun Law Group; Theresa Kristovich, Gordon & Rees LLP; Christina M. Coleman, Law Offices Ramin R. Younessi APC