

Forget the Bells and Whistles:

What Does Your Firm's Web Site Say About You?

BY LES ALTENBERG

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Along with all the tools now available to make one's Web site a technological wonderland comes the temptation to forget one thing: a law firm's Web site ultimately is: the goal of a law firm's Web site is to generate and convert new client prospects. As such, it must be seen and evaluated the same way as any other marketing tool, be it advertising, collateral materials, public relations, etc.

In order to accomplish this, however, one must first understand the unique characteristics of a Web site and of Internet marketing as well. Unlike advertising, a Web site is not an awareness generator — individuals are visiting a site either because they have already heard about it or they have linked to it from another site. Unlike public relations, a Web site does not enhance one's credibility (though not having a Web site may diminish it). And, unlike the requisite firm brochures, newsletters, sales pieces, etc., legal Web sites are not designed to serve as a conversion tool or be stowed away for possible future use by a prospect.

SO WHY BOTHER?

Web sites (particularly legal Web sites) need to be viewed as a lead generating tool akin to that of the Yellow Pages, with the additional advantage of providing a means for offering a great deal of information about the firm and for distinguishing its practice from those of its competitors.

This latter point is particularly important because it suggests that a Web site should inherently underscore and convey the overall firm image and/or brand. Just



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as an ad or a firm brochure would (or at least should) seek to portray the practice in a unique fashion, so too must the Web site dovetail with the rest of the firm's philosophy and integrate with all of the other elements of the firm's communications. At its most basic level, this may simply mean employing the same colors, logo, font, etc. At a higher level, it means creating a site that does all of the above and that also enhances what the brand actually means.

Using the Web site to further the goal of branding the firm involves selecting images and words that create certain feelings. For example, a small firm that concentrates primarily on commercial law may wish to portray itself as large and corporate. Visually, its site may include images of "business in action," meetings, the

world, graphs, etc. Similarly, a firm that emphasizes family law with a very personal touch may elect to go with softer images that convey "caring," "serenity," etc.

QUALITY AND QUANTITY

But conveying and underscoring the firm's brand is not enough. Ultimately, the site must also generate inquiries and "real live" prospects to the practice. This requires building a site that not only distinguishes the firm in a visually attractive manner, but also provides vital information to the visitor. This is where

Web sites as marketing tools are different from other types of vehicles. Both qualitatively and quantitatively, there are far fewer restraints. One can only get so many words into ad or images into a brochure — not so with a Web site.

"Vital information" can be described as anything that might help the visitor make a positive decision to seek a meeting or request information from

the firm. Typically, legal Web sites contain the prerequisite "About Us," "Our Services," "Attorneys," "Practice Areas," and "Contact Us" sections. These are all important, but they can and should be augmented with additional pages that

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cover newsworthy cases on which the firm is working, community involvement activities, newsletters and white papers on critical legal topics, articles the firm's attorneys have written, or even directories of relevant statutes and regulations that affect specific areas of the law. Even legal forms available for downloading can be offered on the site.

The advantages to taking such an approach are three-fold. First, a visitor may find "just the thing" he or she is looking for on this enhanced site. This could be further proof of real expertise in a very specific area of the law, assurances that the people the visitor is hiring are quality individuals, or indications that the firm has worked on very similar type cases. Second, greater content depth provides greater opportunity for the search engines to pick up the site and for the site to be listed higher up on their directories. Third, when a legal Web site is chock full of valuable content, it becomes a portal of useful information that visitors can and will return to time and time again. The key here is to provide "value." To tout a firm's achievements is certainly a by-product of a well-developed Web site — but only if it serves the greater purpose of helping visitors make further decisions, among them, which law firm to retain.

KEEPING THE VISITOR ON-SITE

Of course, providing both quality and quantity of content is still not enough. The site should not take too long to load, even if that means sacrificing some of the bells and whistles. The site should also "speak" to its visitors in a manner that is user-friendly and that the visitor can understand. Other than in a few exceptions, this usually means writing copy that does not contain "lawyers-speak." A visitor should not need to go to another site to help them understand what was stated in the first.

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Remember, it's important that that prospect interested in engaging the services of a law firm stay on your site and not be tempted to move on to another. This requires being visually arresting, eminently relevant and easy to track. Don't make the user "work" to get the information he or she wants. Menu bars, call-outs, special offers, etc. should all be very clear, and the "path" from home page to page and then to sub-page(s) should be logical and easily discernible.

One helpful way to ensure that a site is developed in this fashion is to first lay out

a schematic of the entire site (a tree diagram) that shows how each page is linked from one to the next. The key goal in all of this is to keep the visitor on the site, thereby further establishing a pseudo-relationship between the individual and the firm. With this in mind, it is important not to provide links away from the site that might take the visitor in the direction of a competitor. This includes not just a competitor's Web site, but also online legal directories that may, in turn, contain competitive site listings.

OPTIMIZING THE SITE

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thought-through legal Web site is only effective if enough of the "right" people are driven to it.

Ensuring that this happens requires a number of steps, the first of which is to write and encode into the site a descriptor of the firm and its services, as well as key words or phrases known as metatags. These metatags should reflect those words or phrases known as metatags. These metatags should reflect those words or phrases known as metatags. These metatags should reflect those words or phrases known as metatags.

The key word here is "specific." For example, the term "law firm" will generate thousands upon thousands of listings. "Family law" might turn up less, but still be too broad. "Philadelphia family law" narrows the field considerably, while "Bucks County domestic violence" does so even more. The more specific one can be,

the greater the opportunity to be listed high on the search engines.

A second means for optimizing a Web site is to consistently submit the site to the various search engines. This can be time-consuming and cumbersome, but well worth the effort. Similarly, submitting the site to any and/or all of the relevant legal directories is a great way to increase the likelihood of the search engines directing potential clients toward your site.

All of the above means for optimization are generally free, but of course there are also means for driving Web traffic that come with a cost. These include the purchase of ads on relevant directories and other legal sites as well as pay-per-click programs in which specific words, bids and budgets are submitted and one is billed each time an individual clicks onto the firm's site. Pay-per-click listings are shown on the sponsored sites section of the search engine page.

As with any other marketing medium, Internet marketing requires a great deal of thought and effort. Implemented correctly, it can require some funding. But in applying several of the optimization methods noted above, one increases the chances of success. It is important to note however, that the decisions to first contract with a law firm, and then to seek out specific firms for interview are large ones and the selling cycle can be at times fairly long. Therefore, it is important to have some patience in terms of turning Web site visitors into actual clients.

Equally important is tracking the effectiveness of the firm's optimization efforts through Web tracking services that provide data on the "popularity" of specific words, the number of site visitors, length of visit, point of entry, source, etc. The site optimization process is an evolutionary one that requires constant attention and tweaking.

Of course, electronic optimization should not be the only means for promoting a site. It is also critical to promote the site through all of the other marketing tools at the firm's disposal (letterhead, ads, articles, brochures, etc.).

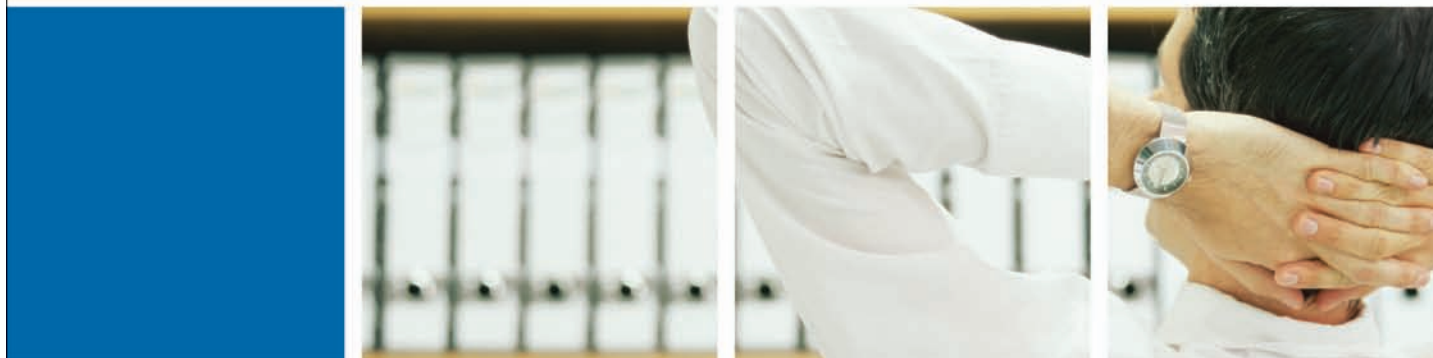
SUMMARY

The keys to an effective Internet presence? In summary, they can be stated as follows:

- Understand the unique one-on-one marketing qualities of Web sites — both their benefits and drawbacks.
- Use the site to underscore and integrate with the overall firm brand and image. Use it to sell what's unique about the firm.
- Develop a site that's visually arresting, though not necessarily one that utilizes time-consuming "bells and whistles."
- Provide "vital information" on the site that helps the visitor make decisions about his/her own situation as well as the type of firm he/she should hire.
- Keep the visitor on your site by making it user-friendly.
- Consistently work to fine-tune and optimize the site.

Finally, as with anything else, be certain that the firm's Web site complies with the state bar association's marketing guidelines. •

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