

How Web-Savvy Are You?

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A Google search of "law firm" produces more than 89 million results. So how can any law firm stand apart from the crowd?

The answer isn't always to spend more. Witness that a recent survey of the Web sites of the Am Law 200 -- by marketing consultants Greenfield/Belser and The Brand Research Co. -- found that many sites fail to effectively market their law firm or differentiate themselves from competitors.

So if the largest firms with huge budgets and access to consultants still end up creating generic, fungible sites, how can smaller firms, with tighter belts, be more effective?

The answer is by fully embracing the latest wave of marketing technology tools, including blogs, podcasts and RSS feeds, among others.

ENTER THE BLOGOSPHERE

When intellectual property lawyer Douglas Sorocco first started publishing a blog in January 2004, he didn't know what to expect. Certainly, he didn't anticipate that he would be able to say that six figures worth of business had come through the doors of his firm Dunlap, Coddling & Rogers, in Oklahoma City, as a result.

Blogs are online journals that are usually written by a single author, with frequent -- often daily -- posts. A trademark of most blogs is an ability to link to other material, such as news stories, articles -- and importantly -- other blogs. Like Web sites, blogs can include graphics, videos, downloads, etc.

At their best, blogs are very interactive. Bloggers don't just post their own thoughts, they also invite readers to comment, thereby transforming the blog from a monologue into a community bulletin board.

What's the marketing value? Blogs are gaining in popularity as a way to demonstrate a firm's expertise and to help personalize the firm by presenting individual writers rather than an institutional front.

Sorocco's blog, Phosita -- which stands for "person having ordinary skill in the art" -- is located at <http://www.okpatents.com/phosita/>. Like his firm's agenda, it covers intellectual property.

"Blogging taps you into a network of people," says Sorocco. The people who've posted comments on the blog, he says, are a mix of potential clients and other individuals with similar interests from many different backgrounds. "It's almost like having a network of experts throughout the world who you can call on at any moment."

Sorocco says that Phosita has led to new legal work for Dunlap Coddling, mainly because lawyers around the country have found the blog and ended up referring work. He says it's even had an unexpected hand in recruiting. After he met J. Matthew Buchanan through Phosita, the firm ultimately hired Buchanan as of counsel.

Buchanan operates a second blog for the firm, Promote the Progress, that focuses on worldwide intellectual property issues. He works with the Oklahoma firm "virtually" from Ohio.

TAKE IT ONE STEP FURTHER

J. Craig Williams of The Williams Law Firm in Newport Beach, Calif., uses most, if not all, of the Internet tech tools at his disposal. His firm's Web site, (wlf-law.com), incorporates animation, video, podcasts and three blogs. The five-attorney firm focuses on complex business litigation with emphasis on environmental, real estate, land use and computer matters.

Williams' blog, May It Please the Court, focuses on providing legal news and observations -- with a healthy dose of humor. (A recent post: "Don't Worry, the USEPA Will Protect You from Death by Chocolate.")

It's undeniably a time commitment. Williams says he spends up to 90 minutes writing each day. "You need to be committed," he says. "If you intend for your blog to have some application to clients or other lawyers -- you can't delegate or have someone else write for you."

Williams is putting more than his writing out there; he's taken to the digital airwaves via podcasting. Along with Robert Ambrogi, a Rockport, Mass., attorney and media law blogger (legaline.com/medialaw) he produces a weekly talk show, "Coast to Coast." The program can be heard on The Legal Talk Network, or can be downloaded to a computer, iPod or other MP3 player.

As with blogs, podcasting can be a good way to communicate with clients. Instead of writing a newsletter, lawyers can record short audio clips that clients can download and listen to at their convenience. "Coast to Coast" usually runs about 30 minutes, but a podcast -- so-called because of Apple Computer Inc.'s popular iPod players -- can range from a short comment (or an audio version of a post) to a stand-alone program.

The startup costs for podcasting are minimal. Of course, there are "high-end" and "low-end" podcasts but, according to Williams, about all you need are "headphones and a microphone from RadioShack." Williams acknowledges that if your clients are businesses or CEOs, podcasting might not be the most targeted forum, but the idea shouldn't be dismissed without closer scrutiny. "A surprisingly large number of people in their 40s and 50s are listening to podcasts," he says, noting that it's not just kids carrying around their music.

Plus, podcasting is a market that's expected to explode in the coming years. Market researcher Bridge Ratings of Glendale, Calif., recently forecasted that by 2010, the audience for podcasts is expected to reach 45 million -- up from an estimated 4.8 million in 2005. Perhaps underscoring the notion that the audience is broader than kids with iPods, the study showed that less than 20 percent of the audience listens to podcasts on an MP3 player.

It's not clear how many people actually listen to a podcast once it's been downloaded. But with a burgeoning audience, listener-tracking services are on the way. In November, Audible Inc., a seller of downloadable audio programs based in Wayne, N.J., announced that it soon plans to roll out an

audience-tracking system that will support the growth of advertising in podcasts, but on a more basic level, will enable podcasters to know whether anyone's listening.

So to get listeners, you'll want to be sure to spread the word about your podcasts. Apple's iTunes is probably the most popular portal, but other directories include dopplerradio.net and ipodder.org.

OPTIMIZE YOUR WEB SITE

One reason many experts suggest firms start blogging is that, by their nature, blogs are frequently updated and typically address hot topics -- two factors that usually generate better results in Internet searches.

But blogging is no guarantee of more visibility from search engines, cautions Jennifer Veesenmeyer, a search engine optimization consultant with FindLaw, based in Eagan, Minn. "There are literally hundreds of things that search engines consider," she says, "including how long your domain name has been around, how many pages are in the site, and how many words are on the site."

The key to appearing at the top of the search result listings -- or "optimization" -- is the content itself. "At one time, optimization was mostly coding -- words that you would hide in the text and other kinds of coding tags," she says. But that's no longer the case.

Today, search engines are continually refining their algorithms to return the most relevant results. So you'll want to identify what keywords potential clients are actually using when they search. For instance, a lawyer who specializes in motor vehicle accidents needs to keep in mind that few people will use "motor vehicle." Instead, they're likely to use phrases like "car crash" or "car wreck" -- which means that the site should include those more casual phrases.

Another factor search engines consider is whether other sites link to yours. It's a type of third-party endorsement. The relevancy of your site is supported if other sites have thought it worthwhile to provide a link for visitors to their site.

Be wary of quick fix tools that promise to increase rankings, such as loading pages with invisible keywords (white text on a white background). With some sophisticated search engines, using these tricks can trigger automatic exclusion of your site. "If a search engine identifies that on your page, it will just drop you," Veesenmeyer says, adding that unlike the legal world, there's no notice and no appeal.

No matter what steps you take to optimize a site, there are no guarantees that it will always come in at the top of the natural search listings. For that reason, the only sure way to land in a high-profile position is to purchase a sponsored pay-per-click listing. Most search engine companies sell sponsored listings. For example, on Google, these paid listings usually are on the right-hand column and at the top of a results page in a blue banner, and appear under the heading "sponsored links."

Still, even though a sponsored links is a surer bet than optimizing a site for search crawlers, many law firms resist them. "What we generally hear is that the firms would prefer to be in the organic listings," says Veesenmeyer, "usually because they think they have more credibility."

SPREAD THE NEWS

RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, is another tool that can increase your firm's visibility among potential clients, recruits and peers. One way to think of it is as "really simple surfing."

Instead of readers having to routinely visit their favorite Web sites to see any new material, RSS feeds enable a news providers to format stories in a way that allows them to be syndicated, i.e., distributed to readers automatically.

In order to receive RSS feeds it's necessary for the end user to install a program called a reader or aggregator. There are a number of readers available on the Web, many at no cost. As you might expect, Google offers a reader, but a simple Web search will reveal many others. You may want to test a couple until you find one with the interface that you like best. News readers collect, update and display feeds from sources you select, anything from *The New York Times* to ESPN.

According to Robert Ambrogi, just about every blog has an RSS feed (or an alternative called Atom). This way, readers who are interested in your blog can automatically receive any new posting on their computer.

Although the number of people using RSS is still small, it's growing quickly, says Rick Klau, vice president, business development at Chicago's FeedBurner, which offers support and analytics services to online publishers of RSS feeds, blogs, podcasts, etc. Klau estimates that FeedBurner currently works with 100,000 publishers -- a tenfold increase from the beginning of 2005.

Among the biggest advantages to using RSS is that, for now, the medium is spam-free, says Klau. "Recipients are always in control of what content they receive." For law firms, this fact also means that RSS can be a better way to communicate with clients than e-mail newsletters.

For example, a little more than one year ago, Stark & Stark, a law firm based in Lawrenceville, N.J., stopped sending e-mail newsletters to clients after it realized that its e-mail was getting lost in cluttered in-boxes.

Instead, the firm started offering clients -- and any other interested Web visitors -- information via RSS. The firm invites Web users to subscribe to any or all of its 16 feeds, which are organized by topic and drawn from its two blogs (braininjurylawblog.com, and njlawblog.com).

"If you're going to do a blog, you should, by all means, use RSS," says director of business development Richard DeLuca. "It's such an efficient way to communicate with clients and potential clients and just the public in general." Stark & Stark also recently started podcasting. As of November, the firm had produced 19 podcasts, each of which is 8 to 15 minutes long.

While it's probably too early to know whether the firm's going to get business from podcasting, it's already getting them noticed. "It's great being at social networking events," says DeLuca, "and hearing, 'Oh, I listened to the podcasts the other day.'"

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