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Second Opinions: Constructing Your Web Site

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John Buchanan, Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe, San Francisco:

When it comes to designing (or revamping) Web sites, keep these four Critical Cs in mind:

• **Clickability:** The fewer clicks to get to the information, the better. People are impatient and want to get to the information they are looking for quickly. Two to three clicks is acceptable; four to five is pushing it; six or more, forget it: they'll never go that far. Good clickability means having a simple, clean site map; uncomplicated navigation; and common elements in the top navigation.

• **Content is king!:** More isn't necessarily better, but site visitors (especially clients) want to know that you know your business -- and one of the best ways to demonstrate that is to provide up-to-date, relevant content on your site. You don't

want your site to just be an electronic brochure of your capabilities -- let your attorneys' work (especially current articles, legal updates, industry briefs, etc.) showcase your firm's ability and experience.

• **Current:** Keep news and information updated. There's nothing worse that outdated, stale information on a site. Even if you just make minor changes, make sure someone is constantly monitoring/auditing your site for dead links, old news, attorney bios (this is a risk management issue if you have bios of attorneys who are no longer with your firm) and other obsolete information.

• **Clear:** Be sure the navigation on the site is simple, clear and intuitive. If you go to a home page, and it's not immediately clear what's "important," chances are you'll lose your visitor before you even have a chance to get them engaged. For the most part, the top navigation elements should (at the least) include practice areas, attorney bios, firm news, and careers.

Larry Bodine, Larry Bodine Marketing, Glen Ellyn, Ill.:

Three essentials:

1. List the industries your firm serves.

2. List representative clients.

3. Enumerate success stories.

These three items are the most powerful marketing elements of a Web site. They are exactly what corporate executives and in-house counsel look for on Web sites. I've heard many corporate counsel say, "I want a lawyer who understands my business" -- what better way to do that than to display your familiarity with an entire industry?

Ironically, these three essentials are often the most difficult items for law firms to construct. They'll have a client list, but will have it sorted by practice group, not by industry. They'll list representative clients freely on Martindale-Hubbell online, but have great reluctance to do so on their own Web sites. And they have an unbelievable amount of trouble writing down their "greatest hits" -- the involved lawyers either won't disclose them or are reluctant to talk about them.

Clients buy industry familiarity but law firms sell practice groups, so it's difficult to get the lawyers to think differently. Clients want to see whom the law firm "swims" with and thus want to see other businesses that the firm is working for.

Law firms are reluctant to reveal their clients' names -- for fear that rival firms will somehow poach them. This is complete malarkey, but it's a reality in dealing with law firms. Finally, clients want to know what great things the firm has done for other businesses. Lawyers grudgingly will point out reported cases, but what sells is a five line write-up of the business aspects of the case.

Donna Payne*, Payne Consulting Group, Seattle:

One of the most important things to keep in mind when relaunching a Web site is maintainability. You can hire a third-party developer to put every whiz-bang feature available into your site. The result is impressive, but if you cannot maintain the content in-house, it's not going to be as effective because the content will not be updated on a regular basis.

Another thing to keep in mind is keywords for the search engines (Google, Yahoo, etc.). List search words that will appear when the person uses the search engine.

Jeffrey Brandt, Cozen O'Connor, Philadelphia:

Understand the soft costs associated with updating a Web site. I was with a firm once that created a beautiful design for a dynamic content Web site. Then I asked where all the time was coming from to populate it. They went back and calculated the attorney time needed to fill their idea of content and it was excessive. They revamped the whole Web site concept, this time being much more realistic.

Jonathan Ezor, Touro Law Center, Institute for Business, Law and Technology, Huntington, N.Y.:

Be sure the site can be updated easily by a non-techie, and make sure at least two employees are both tasked and trained to do so! Firm information changes all the time, from new or departing attorneys to news releases to actual firm name, and it's very embarrassing to have the Web site lag behind the reality.

Be sure that as much of the site is dynamic (created via databases) rather than static (made up of fixed pages), because changing a dynamic site is much easier than going page by page to update a static site for major new developments.

Reid Trautz, Consultant, Washington, D.C.:

The best thing a law firm can do is reorganize your site and rewrite the text from the perspective of the potential client. Too often firms write it as a "look how great we are" perspective rather than a "how can we be of service to you" perspective.

Too often the firm is focused on how it wants to present itself to consumers rather than look at how consumers would like to obtain legal information about their problem and about the firm. This is a holdover from the last century when client brochures were the only game in town.

Take a minute to put yourself in the place of a potential client. Think of a real or hypothetical legal problem that would affect you personally. Now do a Web search for help on this problem. What sites come up? Surf them.

Do they help you? Bookmark them and show them to your Web site developer as examples of what to do or not do.

Finally, while your marketing consultant or designated partner might write the text for the Web site, it can be beneficial to hire an editor to rework the words to focus on the prospective client rather than being too focused on the past feats of the firm.

J. Craig Williams, The Williams Law Firm, Newport Beach, Calif.:

1. Add a blog. Law firm sites tend to be static. Blogs add new content, and dramatically increase visability.

2. Get rated. Add Martindale-Hubbell's rating logo to the bios of those attorneys who qualify.

3. Develop either a video or flash presentation of your office.

4. Feature your support staff, too. You never know where your business comes from.

5. Add a short video introduction for each attorney.

Our firm's blog, www.MayItPleaseTheCourt.net, has taken off beyond our wildest expectations. Between 20,000 to 25,000 readers a week visit our site, and stay an average of 18.5 minutes. The best part is that visitors also view our law firm site, www.wlf-law.com, and we get clients because of it.

Cherie Olland, Jones Day, Cleveland:

For any firm, regardless of size, the single most important thing is to hire the best, most experienced Web developer you can afford -- and then pay close attention to his or her advice. Also, every step of the way ask yourself, "Do we have the resources to keep the content fresh and up-to-date?" It is easier to come up with wonderful ideas for rich content; it is much, much harder to keep it rich.

Theodore Banks, Kraft Foods Inc. North America, Northfield, Ill.:

Biggest complaints when I go to a law firm Web site:

• Not having direct e-mail address for attorneys.

• Not knowing areas of responsibility of attorneys (which is different from a listing of every case every attorney has handled, in all of which they claim to be nationally recognized experts, which of course is not helpful either).

Craig Ball*, Trial Lawyer/Technologist, Houston:

A Web site is a lousy marketing tool if potential clients don't find it when seeking help.

To rise to the top of Google's rankings, make search engine optimization (SEO) your highest priority when launching or revamping your online identity. Simple changes to site architecture, titling and keyword selection dramatically impact whether your site pops up on the first screen of search results or is buried in digital obscurity. Examples: Page title tags are accorded great weight by search engines, so be sure practice area and location keywords are included in page titles, even if just tacked onto the end of each title.

Search engine "spiders" that probe Web sites don't read images, so always include a detailed text counterpart (ALT=) describing any graphics representing your firm name, logo, location or practice areas.

Consider buying regional keywords to insure that your local business prospects don't stray. Think that a cool Flash intro will set you apart? Without steps to offset the damage, a splash page will cause your site to lag behind in search engine rankings. Even if your site is just an online brochure, resist anything that hampers a visitor's progress to the information they need. Most people are looking for addresses and phone numbers, make sure they stay front and center. Finally, maximize the educational component of your site. Nothing promotes links like sound advice and scholarship.

Don Oppenheim, Meyers Nave Riback Silver & Wilson, San Leandro, Calif.:

We revamped our page a while back. Here are some memories:

1. If you expect to launch in three months, plan on six or seven. There will be bugs and desired changes.

2. Have a subgroup within the firm become your beta-test site.

3. Hire a great designer, but there is no need to spend a fortune. Less than $15,000 for most mid-sized firms is more than adequate.

4. Integrate a tremendous amount of flexibility for future changes into the site -- easy to add links, etc.

5. Be sure that one employee is in charge of making changes to the site and is adequately trained to do so. Long-term dependence upon consultants is expensive and lengthens your time to turnaround changes, add firm news to the site, etc.

6. Keep it simple: Overly complex sites do not get as many return visitors as those that are easy to navigate.

7. Consider the front page as if it is the cover of a magazine. Magazine covers change with each issue -- your front page should have at least some shifts every now and again in terms of look and feel.

8. Build a "sticky" site: One that integrates ways to bring viewers back again and again.

Doug Caddell*, Foley & Lardner, Chicago:

I would tell a firm of any size the same thing: Outsource your Web site. There are too many specialized aspects of designing and maintaining a firm site to do it with scarce internal resources, at least if you want it to be effective and inviting. While you can put up a Web site quickly and without help, poorly designed and implemented sites can do more harm than good. We have Web developers on staff, but designing and hosting our firm Web site is not our core competency and we have other priorities for our internal staff. It's an easy decision to outsource.

Josh Demetrescu, Perkins Coie, Seattle:

1. The site should be database-driven. A medium-sized law firm probably has some kind of internal directory/database that can also be used to drive a more interactive Web site than is possible with plain Web pages. This helps current and prospective clients access attorney contact and background information and keeps the data targeted and up-to-date -- and opens up possibilities for cool things with news stories, articles and other content.

2. The site should be maintainable by people other than developers. This is especially true if you do not use internal people to design your site. You do not want to get into a situation where you have to pay someone outside your firm a high hourly rate to handle day-to-day content updates. The person tasked with updating the site should, at the most, need only knowledge of a program such as Microsoft Corp.'s FrontPage or familiarity with filling out Web forms.

3. Spend some time looking at law firm sites so you get a sense of what you like and don't like in site design (both the artistic bits and the way the site operates). That will help you when it comes time to talk to designers and programmers.

Aleisha Gravit, Gibson Dunn & Crutcher, Los Angeles:

The business world changes minute by minute, so a firm's Web site must accommodate the changing needs of sophisticated clients. Seek a site that can be updated immediately by business unit staff without much training and without requiring a professional programmer.

The latest technology is probably not required, and older, simpler technologies can be cheaper to maintain while still offering the required flexibility.

A quality site needs an optimized search engine as well as good primary navigation capabilities for pertinent information such as practice area descriptions, bios and newsletters. Visitors should not have to go through a series of "clicks" to find information; key information should be obvious to the casual visitor.

Roger Schechter*, Grotta, Glassman & Hoffman, Roseland, N.J:

1. Be printer friendly: Especially pages that are likely to be printed and reviewed, and/or passed on to others. Designs with dark backgrounds and other low contrast color choices for text make printed pages unreadable. Layout pages so when printed they do not cut off the right side of the page.

2. Don't overload the main page: Avoid graphics and java applications that slow down the page display. Most users do not wish to be forced to watch a "show" every time they visit a site.

3. Include firm information on every page: Web address, street address, telephone numbers -- perhaps in a banner or footer. Be sure any page printed from your site will at the very least have your firm's Web address on it.

4. Use metatags: Code metatags on every page to optimize search engine visibility. Include a search engine optimization strategy in the content of key pages, such as area of practice pages.

5. Put navigation bars on all pages: This helps visitors easily find your home page and other key pages.

6. Note file sizes on all PDF downloads: No one likes to download a file, only to find out that it is huge and will take significant download time.

7. Be agnostic: Test your site to be sure it works with multiple browsers and versions (Netscape, Internet Explorer, etc.) to ensure high degree of viewing compatibility. Bells and whistles are best left out if it means that they won't work for a significant number of visitors to your site.

8. Video and sound are nice but be mindful that results can be poor for those with slower PCs or without broadband access.

9. Avoid Web components that require a download "plug in." Many people are hesitant to download anything for fear of downloading a virus or that the software plug in installation will adversely affect their computer operation.

Member, LTN Editorial Advisory Board