



DO YOU NEED A WEBSITE?

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A recent article in the ABA Technology eReport explored the topic of law firm web sites. I must admit it put it back on my radar screen, because I thought this question was already asked and answered in the affirmative. But apparently some have still not gotten the message.

According to the 2002 American Bar Association Legal Technology Resource Center survey, 100 percent of firms with 50 or more lawyers and 86 percent of firms with 10–49 lawyers possess websites. The percentage of solo and small firms with 10 or fewer lawyers which have websites is less than 50 percent.

The immediate response of many solo and small firm practitioners is that they do not “get” business from a website. This is the same thinking which is applied to yellow pages advertising. For example, if you do banking law, it is unlikely that a banking officer will go searching for a new lawyer in the yellow pages. For that reason, a free or inexpensive white page listing is sufficient to allow the banking officer to find you once your name is passed along.

On the other hand, your white page listing does not provide any information about your firm. And chances are, if you’re following the recent trend, you may have discontinued your costly listing in Martindale Hubbell, despite its continued popularity as a resource for in-house counsel and knowledgeable corporations looking for legal expertise. Where then does the prospective client go to find out about you before making actual contact? To the internet to find your web site.

Prospective clients are often not comfortable asking a new lawyer for information regarding degrees, experience, community involvement and the like. They usually want to know more about you and your firm before making the initial call or appointment. And in many cases, just want to make sure you are a “player” before calling an unknown attorney who they have been referred to by a third party. It used to be that Martindale Hubbell played that role. If you were “anybody” you were in there. That is not consistently the case now. Plus, Martindale Hubbell was a medium primarily used by those “in the know” and not necessarily by corporate officers seeking assistance. On the other hand, everyone knows how to use the internet.

What of the expense? Doesn't it cost thousands of dollars to establish a web site? Well, it used to. But it doesn't anymore. Like all things technology-oriented, prices have fallen dramatically for simple web sites. It all depends on what type of web site you want to establish.

If your intention is to establish a web site which is like an online brochure, so that interested individuals can find you and learn about your credentials and what you do, get directions to your office, and maybe even send you an email or two, then you can develop a fully functional web site for a few hundred dollars. A search on Yahoo or Google with key words like "attorney website" will yield many solutions, from the inexpensive to the very expensive.

Sites like <http://www.lawyersites.net> and <http://www.legalwebdesigner.com> and <http://www.lawconnects.com> offer inexpensive solutions with all the accoutrements like hosting, domain name registration and email. If you have your materials, like your bio and practice area descriptions, on your computer and ready to paste or upload, you can design your web site on one of these sites in a matter of a few hours. I firmly believe that every lawyer should at least have a site like this.

Some of you are no doubt thinking that if you do work like elder law or family law you don't need a web site. You think your potential clients—mom and pop for example—are not looking on the internet. Think again! Age or status is no longer a defining determinant of computer usage or internet searching. Just ask my 80-year-old mother or 94-year-old uncle. That is, if you can get her off the online bridge tournament and him out of the chat room!

Your web site is also a unique medium to accurately convey your personality, so that you can attract clientele who will appreciate it. So if you fit into that "life is too short" mindset, consider this path. For a perfect example take a look at Norma Chase's site at <http://users.pghconnect.com/normac/bio.html>.

Of course, when it comes to web sites, content is king. While having a web site which is the equivalent of an online brochure will at least serve a functional purpose, it is not something which will keep people returning to your site over and over. And it is not likely to come up high in the listing of web sites returned on a search by practice area. To do that, you need to provide meaningful content. And you need to update your site with new content on a regular basis.

There are many areas of law which lend themselves nicely to marketing on the internet, and will ultimately produce clients. For example, take a look at <http://www.collectionlawyers.com/> or <http://www.ratnerprestia.com/>. If your niche is suitable for online marketing, you will want a more sophisticated site, and may even want to establish a blog.



A blog is nothing more than an online journal which will have a collection of articles, web links, musings, observations, you name it, with content which is constantly and easily updated. It is aptly defined on the blog design web site <http://www.lexblog.com/> at follows:

A law blog -- or "weblog" -- is a new kind of online site. Lawyer blogs take advantage of the latest technology to provide you an Internet presence that's super fresh, customized, totally unique and more valuable to your target audience than standard sites with reused content.

Legal blogs are a snap to update with new material as often as you like. With a high concentration of repeat visitors, blogs also push your content to subscribers as well, and can even encourage interaction among visitors.

You can find a good example of a blog at <http://www.lawlawlaw.com/>. Search engines just love blogs because they are updated constantly, often contain links to other sites, and are also linked to *from* other sites as well. All of these actions have a cumulative effect to cause a search engine to list the site at a higher priority level when returning search results. The goal is to have your firm web site listed on the first screen of web sites found by a potential client.

Some of you have hesitated because you think this is all too complex. Or you erroneously think there is no need to even have the web site. I maintain a listing of web site designers if you are ready to take the plunge. And I can discuss with you the process of refining your search for a designer, determining what type of site to design, and even work with you on content areas. So, when you are ready to proceed, I encourage you to start your journey with a visit to my hot line at 800-932-0311 x2228, to properly plan your itinerary, and make the trip a whole lot less confusing.

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