

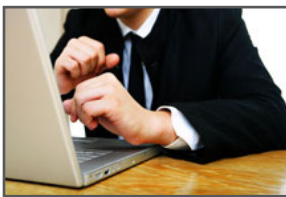


Feature

Electronic Frontiers in Law Firm Marketing

By Anne O'Dell

Forget phone book marketing, direct mail, and everything you ever heard about banner ads.



Studies show that more potential clients than ever before are using the Internet to do research and conduct business. To stay viable and remain in business, today's firms need to meet the most discriminating Internet users on their level and offer them an online

product that is compelling and tech-forward.

In order to remain competitive with technologically advanced firms, the rest of the legal industry needs to stay abreast of developments in technology and figure out innovative ways to integrate those developments into a well-crafted marketing plan.

The best marketing techniques available today will do more than generate interest in your firm's website and lead to revenue; they will turn ad-wary prospective clients into tuned-in fans, leading to more business and more opportunities to expand your firm by hiring new attorneys.

In the recent past, four specific facets of the best law firm websites have emerged on the technological front; attorneys who have not incorporated these marketing devices should consider how best to implement them in the coming year and avoid being left behind.

Because all of these methods capitalize on potential clients' use of the Internet, most are free or extremely low cost, making them viable options even for small firms and solo practitioners.

"If people are Googling their dates, they are Googling their lawyers too," writes Web marketing consultant Larry Bodine in a LawMarketing.com article.

The ubiquitous search engine has become the average user's jumping-off point for Web surfing. For consumers who are

growing ever more wary of advertising, sometimes the best way to get new business is to let clients find you. As Bodine notes, in a technological epoch when "Google" has become a verb, it is vital to optimize your firm's presence on the top Internet search engines.

A Google search for "law firm" yields more than 94 million results. With such an overwhelming volume of information available to potential clients, attorneys and those who help market them need to focus on the best ways to make the practice stand out in a general search engine query.

Bodine recommends that attorneys begin by Googling themselves. Try using several different Internet search engines to find your own practice using search terms that your prospective clients might use. For example, a Google search for "estate planning lawyer Detroit" yields slightly more than 2 million results. Around the same amount of Web pages appeared in a search for "divorce attorney Los Angeles."

If your name "doesn't Google," meaning that your practice does not show up high enough or with acceptable frequency in search engine results, you may ask yourself whether your branding, marketing concept, and general visibility are adequate.

Relevant content is the key to search engine optimization. In this case more than many others, attorneys need to know their audiences and speak their language. What kinds of keywords are your potential clients actually using? If your website is replete with esoteric jargon and legalese, you may lose prospective clients who search with more colloquial terms.

Next, make sure that other third-party websites link to your firm's site. This kind of endorsement is seen by search engines as partial proof that the information on your site is accurate and useful.



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Every attorney should already be writing articles for publications with a substantial online presence in order to boost his or her firm's Internet presence; however, creating and maintaining a legal weblog, also called a blog or blawg, can be an even better way to increase optimization. Because good blogs address current events and trends and are updated on a daily or near-daily basis, they can help to improve a firm's appearance in search results.

Now that the blog has become part of our cultural vocabulary, it is important for attorneys not to simply blog but to blog better than their competitors do.

Evan Schaeffer, author of the popular blog *Legal Underground* and co-editor of the niche-oriented *Blawgcasting*, writes, "An entertaining and informative exercise is to browse the archives of your favorite established webloggers".

"Look at their first post, then their second, then all the posts from the first month, then all the posts from their second and third months—and so on, post by post. You'll see the weblogs develop as the authors head off in new directions after coming to forks in their weblogging roads and choosing one path over another."

If you already have a weblog, Schaeffer writes, it should contain frequent posts on a range of subjects, some at the fringe or even slightly outside of your area of practice. Your readers should be able to get a sense of your personality when they peruse the blog.

Perhaps most important, Schaeffer says, your blog should provide relevant and insightful editorial commentary in addition to facts and links to other articles. The blogs that are consistently ranked among the best in the world in blog reviews tend to have more links to other sites than other blogs.

Legal bloggers need not fear sending potential clients away. If the linked articles are relevant, surfers will always come back to the source.

Catchy titles, concise writing, simple language, and related photographs to provide visual interest are other aspects Schaeffer considers important to those who are beginning a blog or revamping an existing one. He also recommends freely allowing readers to leave comments, another distinguishing mark of the best blogs on the Web.

The latest and greatest of law firm marketing technologies is podcasting. Another brand-new word in the popular lexicon,

"podcast" is a portmanteau of "iPod," Apple's omnipresent portable device for listening to audio files, and "broadcast." The word denotes a serial audio product for Internet publication that is available to listeners by subscription.

Podcasts can be heard on an MP3 player or personal computer, and the technology is rapidly gaining popularity among the public. According to Robert Ambrogi, author of the legal technology blog *LawSites*, 2005 was "the year of the podcast."

He recently wrote, "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."

Although his own weekly podcast, *Coast to Coast*, runs in 30-minute segments, Ambrogi notes, "A podcast...can range from a short comment or an audio version of a post to a stand-alone program."

With as little investment as a USB microphone and MP3-recording software, you can create your own podcasts. Myriad tutorials are available online for podcast creation.

Podcasters can then edit and publish the finished product through such websites as *FeedForAll.com* and *FeedBurner.com*. Other websites will host the relatively large MP3 files for free or for a nominal cost.

Although the popularity of podcasts and blogs will continue to grow over the next several years, firms should not neglect the e-newsletter. Far from humble, this format is still accessible to the legions of Internet users who may be too busy to find and read blogs and too tech-wary for podcasts.

However, attorneys and marketing staff may need to update the existing e-newsletter's format to ensure that it will be received, read, and forwarded by as many subscribers as possible.

Rather than simply creating a PDF or HTML version of a print newsletter, Bodine recommends that firms pay special attention to the formatting of the electronic product. Titles should catch interest and be followed by a one- or two-sentence synopsis with a link to the full-text article on the firm's website.

Bodine applauds e-newsletter publishers that judiciously use HTML graphic elements, include a subscription option on the company website's main page, and carefully and consistently monitor Web traffic reports on reader habits.



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One of the most troublesome aspects of e-newsletter publishing is spam-blocking software. If the newsletter is not deliverable, it is not readable; Bodine states that attorneys must put forth every effort to ensure that anti-spam programs will not flag their emails.

Always review subject lines and text for words and phrases that might trigger spam blockers. You should monitor state and local laws regarding email and spam regulation; and working with a major, trusted Internet service provider whose

IP address is approved by anti-spam software can improve e-newsletter outcomes.

By focusing on your Internet marketing strategy in a way that directs fewer dollars toward traditional advertising and concentrates more on creating an omnimedia Web presence, you can stretch a minimal marketing budget into surprising returns in the form of higher revenues, more clients, and, ultimately, more positions for new attorneys in your firm.

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