



Feature

Internets, Intranets, and Extranets: Getting Caught in the Web

By Cary Griffith

The same technology that has revolutionized the way lawyers present themselves and their services to the public is also being used to revolutionize the way they practice law. These new web technology tools are typically referred to as intranets and extranets, and while they share the law office's computing infrastructure, they have an entirely different purpose than their website cousin.



Law Firm Websites

The turn of the millennium saw lawyers rapidly adopting and using the Internet, usually to setup their own websites. A decade ago you didn't practice law without an ad in the Yellow Pages. Today most

attorneys wouldn't consider practicing without a prominent web presence.

The purpose of the law firm website is almost entirely advertising and marketing. "It provides the ability for prospects to fully evaluate the firm and the attorneys that they're hiring," explains Greg Wolsky, Chief Marketing Officer for Lindquist & Vennum, a large Minnesota-based law office. In fact, Wolsky likes to refer to law firm websites as the great evaluators. They can be difficult to feed, but they're essential.

Like most marketing professionals, Wolsky doesn't believe the majority of prospective clients looking for legal representation search the internet for an *IP attorney in Akron*. But regardless of how prospective clients learn about your firm—word of mouth, referral, law school relationship, or by some other means—having a professional website is like that first handshake and smile, but with a lot more information packed behind it.

The Lindquist and Vennum site is typical. Its home page boasts "Firm News," "Practice Group News," and a list of revolving features. Attorney resumes, firm publications, and a thumbnail sketch of the firm are just one click off the home page.

In today's marketplace, most lawyers consider a law firm website as no longer optional. But, increasingly, the technology used for the law office website is also being used to provide lawyers with gateways to powerful new practice tools.

Leveraging Web Technologies

"The Internet's been a great thing," comments Mike Wilens, President of West Group, one of the key players in the information marketplace and a frontline developer of practical

web technologies for lawyers. "When I got here in 1997," Wilens remembers, describing Westlaw access prior to the Internet, "we had this incredible staff and infrastructure with T1 lines and all the law firms running private this and private that." Today, Wilens concludes, "They're all running essentially Internet technologies."

The reasons companies like West are producing more applications deliverable via the web and more attorneys are using them include:

- A standard communications protocol and sophisticated, low-cost information infrastructure (the Internet)
- Standard browsers (Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer)
- A large variety of powerful (and cheap) web technology tools already available and being developed and produced at a furious rate
- Platform independence—for the most part, you don't have to buy into a particular type of hardware or software in order to make web tools work
- And perhaps most of all, cost

Today law offices recognize that the cost of proprietary non-web-based software (e.g., timekeeping and billing) is often only a fraction of the cost of the education required to implement and use it. However, if you have ever accessed and used the Internet, chances are you've used a standard browser. You've also quickly caught on to the simplicity of using these new tools, hence one of the primary reasons more and more specialized legal applications are being created using web technologies.

Intranets and Extranets

Intranets use web technologies to create enterprise-wide private Internets used solely for the conveyance of information within an organization. Good examples of law office intranet uses include the conveyance of office-wide policies & procedures, standard forms, biographical and organizational information, work product databases, collaborative project management, and so forth.



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The intranet for a corporate law department is not much different than a law firm intranet. For example, Ceridian Corporation, a Fortune 500 company, uses an intranet to connect its lawyers to relevant work product, important company and subsidiary information, policies and procedures, and to each other. Large directories and databases are all accessible via standard web browsers. Simple search templates easily facilitate the process of searching through vast amounts of information.

Similarly, Venue, the Lindquist and Vennum intranet, provides its firm employees with access to important staff information, policies and procedures, directories and more. Venue, explains Wolsky, contains the usual kinds of firm information, but also, on occasion, specific legal project information.

Extranets use web technology and the Internet's infrastructure to link remote offices and/or businesses in a password-protected, secure, private, project-driven website. Good examples of extranet uses include litigation support, case management, acquisitions and mergers, and anything else that requires the complex sharing of documents and information between remote offices and parties.

Today an increasing number of corporate law offices are asking their outside counsel to setup extranet websites where in-house and outside lawyers can share legal project documents and information.

"We've had our preferred outside counsel set up e-rooms with document check-in and checkout capabilities," comments Rick Worrell, a Senior IT Analyst with Cargill, Inc., one of the largest agricultural companies in the world. Cargill has hundreds of attorneys worldwide—both in-house and outside. Extranets are one way the company keeps them connected, particularly on a project-specific basis. "It's another service our outside counsel can provide us," explains Worrell.

In some cases, the boundaries between intranets and extranets blur. One of the strengths of the new technology is its flexibility. Consider, for example, West Group's new Knowledge Management (or KM) tool.

Most law offices, particularly large law firms, have in-house legal-research and memoranda databases. These databases store the firm's intellectual work product, which can take the form of legal agreements, forms, research, legal memos, and just about anything else lawyers in the firm want to capture for future use. These databases are typically accessible via intranets, using web browsers, and can be searched in a variety of ways. They are classic law office intranet applications.

West's KM product can, for a price, automatically scan a firm's legal research and memoranda database and hypertext link every legal citation to the full-text of the case, regulation, or statute in West's massive Westlaw database. Perhaps just as important, if lawyers from that firm are online using Westlaw (again, viewing it over a username-and-password-protected Internet site with a standard browser-in effect, an extranet), a customized tab on their Westlaw screen will indicate whether any firm-wide legal research or memoranda has ever cited the primary law being reviewed.

"The biggest selling feature about West KM is the seamless integration between West's database and the law firm's intellectual assets," explains Mick LaVelle, a West Strategic Account Executive.

West is not alone. Other vendors, law firms, and corporate legal departments are rushing to leverage this new technology.

"Since introducing Lexis.com several years ago," comments Lou Andreozzi, President of LexisNexis, "[we've known] that the Internet must be a focus for us in everything we do. The vast majority of our online users are coming to our web product. In addition, our latest acquisitions—ADI, Courtlink, etc.—are businesses that are harnessing the power of the web to bring very powerful tools to the market."

Law offices and vendors generally agree. The Internet has revolutionized the way law offices market their services. And new web technology tools are beginning to revolutionize the way they practice law.

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