Law Firm Website Contact Forms

Steve Matthews | September 2011

It's arguably the most important thing on your law firm's website, the whole reason why it exists. Yet it's usually parked in some distant corner of the site, and a challenge for visitors to find quickly and use easily.

What is it? It's your "Contact Us" functionality.

A prospective client, having reviewed a firm's website in detail, often decides to reach out and speak with one of the firm's lawyers. This contact is typically established using one of three methods:

- Phone us
- Email us
- Fill out and submit this online contact form.

Many firms use all three contact methods, while some firms will limit the number of contact points made available. I recommend maximizing both the number and visibility of contact options, but ultimately, each contact style is an option for firms, not a requirement.

In this month's column, I thought it might be interesting to isolate and discuss one of those methods: the law firm website contact form.

What type of form?

The function of web forms is fairly consistent. The user fills out the various text fields, drop-down menus, checkboxes, radio buttons and so forth, and clicks a "Submit" button. The data is extracted on the server side and then typically emailed to a person or group within the firm.

That's simply the technology, however. Within the legal market, format tends to fall into one of three categories:

Online Contact Forms – Intended to be short and direct, these forms relay an individual's key contact information back to the firm. A firm representative, often a lawyer (but not always), will then follow up.

Advantages: Most efficient at generating leads; easily placed in the sidebar and footer areas of websites and replicated across an entire website.

Disadvantages: Convey little in terms of detail; may require more human time to filter.

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Non-Client Intake Forms – These forms require more detail from the website visitor. If a significant number of questions are asked, the form will often be moved to a dedicated web page. By increasing the amount of information collected, firms in effect create a filter for incoming contacts. This causes a bit of a tradeoff: firms get a boost in the "quality" of contacts received, but often at the cost of some contacts being discouraged by the amount of data required.

Advantages: Requesting more detail upfront can be an effective method of reducing the "tire kickers" and the time invested to follow up. Adding a few "qualification" questions to a heavily used web form is rarely a bad decision.

Disadvantages: Nothing kills leads faster than a long and detailed intake form. Firms must find a happy medium here: collect enough information to qualify the contact without scaring the individual away because (a) the form requests too much personal information without a prior relationship or (b) the form is too long and becomes an intimidating process.

Intake Forms for Private Clients – An alternative to both the shorter contact form and the longer intake form is a separate client intake form on a private area of the website. Absent a prior relationship, forms requiring private information may intimidate prospects, and in any event, most law firm website disclaimers advise against conveying such information without first establishing a lawyer-client relationship, since that information likely is not privileged.

A viable alternative is to use two separate forms: the first to qualify prospects, the second to collect detailed information. These forms can exist outside the website's navigational structure and can be hidden from public view, with the URL available for lawyers to forward to clients as needed.

Advantages: Having a dedicated intake form for confirmed clients can take away the pressure. Firms can collect a "second round" of details from clients, and the amount of information collected during the initial intake may be culled to include only the essentials.

Disadvantages: Firms need to be careful not to extract "too much' from the initial contact form, such as details that may be needed to filter out unqualified contacts or that are helpful to making decisions early in the relationship.

Whatever the contact form choice, firms need to find the 'sweet spot' between asking for too much and too little information. Ask good general questions during the initial contact process, and the flow of inquiries won't be impeded, the quality of contacts will be improved, and the firm can make smarter, quicker decisions during the early part of the client relationship.

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