

Next generation of law firm websites Influenced by social media

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The best law firm websites have an entirely new look and feel. Propelling these dramatic changes are the user interfaces and content delivery systems popularized by smartphones and tablets, as well as online usage preferences and habits created by social media.

In light of these changes, your law firm website is more important than ever before.

Research conducted by [Greenfield/Belser](#) and the [Brand Research Company](#) shows that more than 75 percent of potential clients locate and vet lawyers online, and that these clients are profoundly influenced by the quality of your website. Amazingly, it takes users only about 1/20 of a second to form an initial impression of your firm.

“Your website must convey your message strongly, succinctly and in very little time,” said Joe Walsh. “In the old days, when first meetings took place in your office, law firms invested a lot of money in attractive office space. Today, these meetings take place online. Your online space must create a strong impression.”

Walsh is a principal and creative director at Greenfield/Belser, a national leader in brand research, strategy and design for professional services firms. He discussed website trends and best practice before the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association. The presentation took place Oct. 9 at Fogo de Chao in LoDo, Denver.

Social media set the pace

The most-popular social media sites offer users a “mash up” up different applications and a strong graphic navigation system. These elements are migrating to websites. So, too, are social media themselves.

Social media “buttons,” with links to the firm’s content on sites like LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, should appear on every page. The firm should consistently post fresh content to these social media sites as well as the firm’s own website.

“Navigation, or how you get around on a law firm website, need not be limited to the usual navigation bar or internal links,” said Walsh. “Navigation presents a wonderful opportunity for creativity, especially when links are incorporated into graphics.

“In an illustration, for example, you can click on a graphic and be taken to more information about that subject,” said Walsh. “An industry page can present with a page-full of client logos. When you click on the logo, it revolves and the case story appears. The bio page can present with interesting pictures of lawyers. When you click on the picture, the bio appears or the lawyer steps forward and talks to you.”

Even Microsoft is betting on image-oriented navigation for its new operating system, Windows 8. Instead of the usual menu-based navigation, it is using clickable “live tiles” on the home page, which are not only links but also stream new information.

Also carried over from social media is an increased comfort with scrolling. Until now, web designers aimed at creating short pages that precluded the need to scroll. Because of social media, users are now much more comfortable using scrolling. This opens up new design opportunities.

“Finally, within the next 18 months, mobile devices will be used more often than computers to access the Internet,” said Walsh. “Law firms must create mobile versions of their websites with layouts that look equally good on smartphones and tablets.”

Stand and deliver

“Most existing law firm websites are based on similar templates,” said Walsh. “Most often, this consists of some version of a large horizontal photo, with three columns of content underneath. Navigation runs along the top and bottom.

“They all look pretty much the same and say the same thing,” said Walsh. “In my opinion, they are wasted pixels. How is a potential client supposed to use this information to choose you over another firm that looks and sounds exactly the same?”

“Break out of this mold,” said Walsh. “Stand and declare. Toss away the templates and have the courage to try something completely original and different. Your home page can look any way you like, and say anything you want it to say.”

Your home page should make you stand out from the crowd. “Too often, law firms get bogged down in text on their homepages,” said Walsh. “Determine what makes your firm unique. State it prominently. In fact, make this just about the only text on your home page. Repeat this brand message on every page (even search pages).

“Any graphics used for your homepage and elsewhere in your site should also reflect your uniqueness,” said Walsh. “This automatically rules out stock photos and other stock images, like globes, courthouse pillars, and striding businesspeople carrying suitcases. It rules out the use of models instead of your own lawyers and staff.

“Especially, you want to rule out photos of skylines, buildings, lobbies and conference rooms,” said Walsh. “Do you think that the fact that you are in a city, in a building, have a lobby and offer a furnished conference room in any way makes you unique? It doesn’t. Don’t waste your valuable homepage or website space on clichés.”

Think like a client

Too many law firm websites function as online brochures, talking on and on about the firm and its “features” – its history, its practice areas, its attorneys and its news. Research shows, this is not what visitors are interested in.

Potential clients are interested in “benefits” rather than features. They want to know that you have solved problems like theirs, for businesses in their industry, successfully in the past. They want to know that you will answer their phone calls, staff their matters correctly, provide them with ongoing education and bill them appropriately.

“Organize your website around client industry and client needs, not your law firm organization chart,” said Walsh.

“Potential clients also want to work with a law firm that is a good cultural fit,” said Walsh. “After all, law is relationship-based. Don’t be afraid to let your personality shine through on your website, and don’t confine personality to the careers or bio section. Let potential clients know what it would be like to work with you over the long term.”

One great way to demonstrate client-orientation is through the use of client matter or case stories. “Use short, vibrant stories to showcase your firm’s professional values and the way you solve problems,” said Walsh. “These can appear in many places – in bios, in practice area descriptions, on industry pages and in dedicated ‘experience’ sections.”

Of course, you must get client permission to use these stories.

The new graphic website

Today’s online news, content and social media sites are rich in graphics. Take a look at Facebook, Flickr or Pinterest. Carefully consider *USA Today*, or the homepages of CNN.com or MSN.com. Today’s effective law firm website should also use graphics.

Photos are an important element, as long as they are original (not stock) and reflect the firm’s unique message. Imagery is central and defining. Photos should do more than simply break up blocks of words.

Also, photos are a good way to demonstrate client-orientation. Make ample use of photos of clients, their businesses and their industries. Photos of lawyers that appear on their bios are often stiff headshots. Instead, use a less-formal photo that provides additional information about the lawyer’s personality and interests.

“But don’t limit yourself to photos,” said Walsh. “There are many interesting ways that other types of graphics can be used to display information. Why present a dense page of unreadable text when a list, chart, table, map, diagram or illustration could present the same information in a much more interesting and compelling way?”

Online elements like surveys, questionnaires and “games” invite user interaction.

Think Outside the Box

“On the websites we design,” said Walsh, “we often use handwriting and drawings. We create diagrams on whiteboards. We arrange a collage of personal and professional items on a lawyer’s desk or on a bulletin board, and use that picture on the lawyer’s bio.”

In a website designed for a law firm composed of lawyer/scientists, Greenfield/Belser used the layout of the periodic table of the elements to organize information on the site. “This resonates strongly with the firm’s clients in the scientific community,” said Walsh.

Color, motion and sound also grab attention. “Online color is free,” said Walsh, “and yet many law firms fail to make full use of it. In the age of YouTube, visitors to your website are used to video and animation. Although eight minutes of a talking head can be deadly, 30 seconds of a professionally done video can be extremely effective.”

Webinars, seminars and presentations should be recorded and made available on a law firm’s website. “We recommend building a ‘mini-site’ for a special event within the main law firm website,” said Walsh. “This includes information about the benefits of the event, the presenters and the topic, as well as links to useful resource materials.”

Certain items lend themselves to be broken out or placed in sidebars as graphic elements for special emphasis. These include case stories, client testimonials (print or video), fast facts, awards, accolades and rankings. This sort of information disappears when it is buried in paragraphs of text.

Keep online content fresh

Previously, law firm websites content consisted mainly of words and pictures. Today, they include a vast range of content, from illustrations to webinars to video.

No matter what the type of content you are posting, however, one rule remains the same. It must be kept fresh. Each time you add new content to a law firm website, it “shakes” the web and attracts the search engine spiders to take a new look.

“Words will always be an important part of law firm websites,” said Walsh. “We just have to be more careful how we use them. On the Internet, people read 25 percent slower than they do on paper. Plus, they scan rather than read. You cannot present them with a dense block of grey text and expect them to read it carefully – or at all.

“Headlines and subheads are important for providing ‘clues’ to the busy reader,” said Walsh. “Sentences and paragraphs should be kept short and active, with lots of white space. Lists and bullet-points are good, as long as they are not too long. Keywords should appear in headlines and subheads, and in the first paragraph of any text.

“Avoid abstract language about legal concepts,” said Walsh. “Use concrete, engaging stories to keep readers interested.”

Attorney bios or profiles are a good place to introduce fresh content. Most law firm bios consist of a dry list of accomplishments. Instead, create bios and profiles that truly reflect an individual lawyer’s personality. What makes him or her unique? Supplement credentials with meaningful quotes and personal outside-the-office interests. Support this message with meaningful graphics.

The best law firm websites do not sell, they teach. They establish law firms as thought leaders in their targeted niches. In addition to case stories, websites should provide links to a steady supply original work like the firm’s blog posts, e-alerts, newsletters, white papers, analysis and original research.

Law firms should know that more than 75 percent of potential clients will use the Internet to find and research them before making a call. In the Internet age, your website has become extremely valuable real estate. It should look and feel unique. One way to do this and set you apart from the competition is to adopt the look, feel and navigation techniques made popular by social media.

For examples of these concepts, see samples on the [Greenfield/Belser](#) website.