# Writing for the Web: Two Basic Rules

(Truth be told: five rules, really, depending on how you count...)

Recently in a telephone conversation a new contributor was astounded to hear our recommendation to include outbound links in the articles he was posting to JD Supra. (We routinely recommend that contributors link key phrases in their docs to relevant content on their blogs, websites, etc.)

He asked: "What about my readers? How will they feel about clicking somewhere and finding themselves on another website not necessarily of their choosing? Will they mind being taken away from my article?"

One lawyer's thoughtful consideration for his readers aside, it is remarkable that even today hypertext markup language seems to some such a novel way to deliver information. This is the atmosphere in which so many of us still operate, even now, in the Web's second decade. Before we get too carried away with social media and social networking and cloud computing this and crowd sourcing that ... worth acknowledging: for many of us, this is all still very new stuff. Even the basics.

- **The Rule of Three: Make your text and links work together**

In the mid-90s I used to tell Web writers that their work had to succeed on three levels:

1. If a reader only read the body of words on the screen in front of them, the text should "work" (resonate, make sense, be a good read, etc.). 2. If a reader only clicked on the links before them, those links should be worthwhile (and go to interesting places, contain worthwhile information, etc.). 3. If a reader read the words and clicked the links that, too, should resonate. The package deal and its component parts should be worthwhile, no matter how you sliced it.

I think this remains a fairly good rule of thumb today for lawyers who are blogging, uploading to JD Supra, guest-writing articles, and generally making an effort to showcase their expertise through substantive legal content. Hold yourself to a standard whereby your words, your links, and the combination of the two resonate for your readers. Call it a rule of three.

**- The Rule of Two: Write for people and computer programs**

Jump ahead to 2009 and now, more than ever, we not only write for people, we also write for the search engines. (It would be folly to dismiss the role of search engines as drivers of attention to your written work. Even in the Age of Social Media, Google leads the way as a source of organic traffic to most websites.)

What does this mean to a Web writer?

1. Write for people, who as readers are often compelled to click and read something because the title is catchy, interesting, enigmatic, on-target, and so on. (This isn't brain surgery: what titles catch your eye? Write those.)

2. Write for computers, which have become extraordinarily sophisticated in determining what is relevant but are still just computers. Smart? Yes. As nuanced as the human reader? No.

Simply put: if you want to be found in search for certain key words and phrases, use them. If you don't use them you won't be found for them.

We live at a time in which information comes to us in the form of titles and links, and so I am talking very simply about writing good titles. Write your titles with two different influencers in mind: people and the computers they use to find you.

We know what it looks like when a writer does just one of the above. Writing solely for search is at best tacky, at worst black hat. Writing only for human eyes is, on the other hand, wasted opportunity.

If consumer bankruptcy is your specialty (or, rather: the specialty for which you'd like to be found) add the prefix "Consumer Bankruptcy:" to your titles whenever it makes sense.

Intellectual Property? Add the phrase. New York Real Estate? Ditto. Non-profit Organizations? Same.

You get the idea. But be balanced about it. In fact, maybe there's just one rule: as a writer, strive for balance between the various exciting forces at play within the online landscape.