

Top Five Digital Landmines for Lawyers

Steve Matthews | December 2007

There are a number of situations where a lawyer's personal brand can take a hit on the modern web. From an unfavourable newspaper story being permanently codified within the paper's archives, to casual web participation showing up in the search engines for a lawyer's name. Reputation management has quickly become a very important consideration to how professionals choose to participate online. And since almost all content eventually hits Google, lawyers are now faced with the ongoing challenge to monitor (and mold) what clients and potential clients can see about them.

The intent of this piece is not to scare, but simply to identify some of the possible pitfalls that any lawyer can run into. It is important, however, to recognize that lawyers who do not participate online are often the most vulnerable to these types of reputation issues. While definitely not immune, lawyers who web-publish to promote their legal services are often in direct control of the content most frequently accessed about them. And in some cases, having this kind of web collateral can act as a buffer reducing the visibility of negative content.

So without further ado, here are my top five reputation "landmines" for lawyers:

1. The Newspaper Story Gone Awry

Bad press has long been an Achilles heel to anyone in the media spotlight – inaccuracies, misquotes, etc. But on the web, the damage can be much worse. The same story that would have blown over in a couple of days, now permanently resides in the paper's online archives. It will be picked-up and indexed by Google, and if even a people link into it, that story may well sit at the top of the Google rankings for a lawyer's name.

Now let me pour some salt in: As the story and links further age, these documents can gain quasi-authority status – making it very difficult to move down in the rankings.

2. Blog Attacks

Negative comments from a high profile blogger can be almost impossible to defend against. Based on the raw number of links coming into these sites, Blogs often score very well with Google in terms of reputation. A proper name that shows up in the title of a post, or even a mention somewhere within the post's text, may be enough to garner a page-one ranking for that person's name in Google.

(Continued on page 2)

Steve Matthews is the Founder and Principal of Stem Legal, a company dedicated to bringing web visibility to the legal industry. A prolific blogger, Steve co-founded the Canadian legal blogging cooperative Slaw (www.slaw.ca), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy (www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog (www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com). Steve can be reached at steve@stemlegal.com.



The impact of such a situation would obviously depend on what the blogger said, but what's even more critical here is the response. On more than one occasion, sending a demand letter to a blogger has led to a PR disaster with the letter being published by the blogger, and hundreds of other blogs doing the same in a show of solidarity.

3. Having A Google Twin

What happens if two lawyers have the exact same name? What if you share a name with a well known sports or political figure? Do you stand a chance of being found online?

Having a Google Twin is a problem now, but will become significantly worse in the future. As more bloggers emerge, more legal practices move their marketing activities to the web, and as the world's online population grows, identity confusion is going to increase.

4. The High Profile Court Case

Courts, as you can guess, have a very high authority ranking with Google. A good rule of thumb is that most cultural institutions (Courts, libraries, .gov & .edu domains) will have similar authority online.

It's a simple fact that lawyers' names get associated with court decisions, and potentially court documents. Whether due to client representation or (forbid) being named themselves, it's not uncommon for court decisions to show up in Google. This scenario may sit ok when the decision is flattering, but what if it isn't? What if every search for your name delivers a page of related news stories? To date, most newspaper websites don't link to outside sources, but if that policy changes, you can bet they will link into decisions and related court documents – further fuelling their value within the Google rankings.

5. The Personal Web -vs- The Business Web

The web has become a very social place in recent years, and not all of it business or professional development related [who knew? :)]. Lawyers must evaluate the activities they want to participate in, and decide whether they fit into their personal or professional persona. From personal blogs to Facebook photos, everything you publish on the public web becomes a potential evaluation tool within your "virtual CV".

And Now For the Big Question...

Who owns you? If you Google your name, do you come up number one? What's that first page look like?

This article was originally published on Slaw.ca.