

The “Big Guys” of Law Firm Web Development

Get the information you need before you sign

By Megan Braverman and Beth Miller

Establishing, maintaining or revitalizing a website demands the time and focus most lawyers would rather devote to their clients. That's why many law firms outsource their web development and ongoing online marketing.

The law firm web development market offers options ranging from off-the-rack sites to custom websites. Some law firms go with companies we'll call the “Big Guys”: large web development firms that have made their name in the legal industry offering “turnkey” website development, search engine marketing (SEM) services and directory listings.

Berbay falls somewhere in between the Big Guys and smaller, custom website developers—or maybe we fall outside this range altogether.

What most law firms often need us to do is step in and take over web responsibilities where somebody else left off—what we call Website Revitalization. This may be taking over and working directly with the Big Guys on your behalf, tracking down the outfit that did your original site, or putting our resources to work to complete a stalled website project.

We know where to go, who to talk with and we do the follow-up you don't have the time or interest to do. In short, we get it done.

Getting back to the Big Guys: Contracting with these firms has pros and cons, just as partnering with a firm like Berbay does. For some law firms, it might make sense. What's important is knowing the both sides before you sign on the dotted line. Based on our



experience, the following are some key aspects to consider.

Pros

Speed – The Big Guys can develop a firm website in less than a week. As with anything, this speed has a trade-off (more on that later). But if you just need a basic website very quickly, one of these companies might be the right choice.

Cost – Sites developed by the Big Guys are usually less expensive to create than a site tailored to your firm. Again, there's a trade-off, but if cost is your deciding factor, this might be a good way to go.

Account representative standardization – When you work with the Big Guys, your relationship is with your account representative who relays your website changes to a hands-on programmer via a work order. If your account rep suddenly leaves or is transferred, a new one will step in and be your contact.

Cons

Speed – The Big Guys can be fast when it comes to developing websites, however, in Berbay's experience can be excruciatingly

slow when it comes to making website updates. Getting these companies to make changes to your site—even minor ones like adding a comma—can take a few days, and often requires that someone on your end follow up with your account rep. Too, it frequently takes more than one try to get the update done the way you requested it. That's one reason that law firms don't get these changes made: No one in-house has time to follow up on them.

Content standardization – The reason the Big Guys' websites are usually faster and less expensive to develop is that their design and content is “canned”: The layouts are templates, the images are stock photos, etc. The copy describes your practice area generally, but doesn't differentiate your practice from others in your field or geographical area. The Big Guys will tailor your website's copy to a certain extent, but you have to take the lead and keep on it.

Ask yourself how important is having a website tailored to your firm? A customized site can generate more leads by immediately communicating your points of differentiation to an online visitor; however, both template and customized sites are only foundations to build on; it's what you do with the site regularly that counts.

Content updates – The Big Guys usually offer a content management system (CMS),

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which ideally allows you to make a lot of changes yourself. However, we have found that the companies typically don't tell you that you have a CMS or have the option of getting one. And if they do, there's still the matter of someone in your office learning how to use the system and being responsible for making changes.

Flexibility – The Big Guys' sites are fairly inflexible. Let's say you contracted for one of these websites years ago and now you are interested in expanding and enhancing it. Based on our experience, it's very likely that we couldn't make some of desired changes, such as creating new attorneys' biography pages. Typically you would either start from scratch (in which case you might as well have begun with a custom-built site), or limit your changes to those that fit within the structure of the programming framework and your contract.

Your Account representative – Although we discussed how account rep standardization can be a positive aspect, there is a trade-off. You aren't developing a relationship with the person who actually makes the changes so no one at the Big Guys' firm is becoming familiar with how you want things done. You are starting from zero every time you pick up the phone. Also, due to the turnover and seeming lack of communication among incoming and outgoing account reps, you often find yourself bringing the new rep up to speed on the project status.

Website “face lifts” – Many contracts with the Big Guys entitle law firms to a periodic website “refresh” which might include, changing out the photos or updating the copy on a certain number of pages. However, it's often up to you to contact the web developers and remind them that you are owed these updates. And even when the company contacts you, you still bear the onus of providing the information, selecting the photos, etc.

Oversight and responsibility – With the Big Guys, different people are handling various

aspects of your website—programming, copywriting, search engine marketing—but nobody has final oversight and nobody has ultimate responsibility. Not only does this increase the potential for mistakes, but also no one is looking at the big picture asking whether the changes make sense, fit into what's already there, that the links are going where they should, etc. Even more important, no one is proactively and regularly looking at how you can enhance your website.

When you work with a firm like Berbay, our role is to look at your site from both a macro and micro level.

Potential for conflicts of interest – The Big Guys frequently provide SEM services to direct competitors in the same geographical area. This means that they are pitting you against several of your competitors that they are also being paid to move to the top search engine rankings for the spot you want. This seems like a conflict of interest. We've asked, but have never received a satisfactory answer as to how this can be rationalized.

On the other hand, the independent SEM specialists we work with decline to take on another client in the same “space” and geographic area because it presents a potential conflict of interest.

Contracting – We have regularly been called on to review the Big Guys' contracts on behalf of our clients, and talk with these companies to determine exactly what a client signed up for and for how long. The Big Guys' contracts tend to be long and vague and commit clients to a period of two years or more, so you should have an in-depth conversation with the sales representative about what exactly the package includes.

These companies often link your website to a directory listing in order to increase your search engine rankings, which is something you may want to keep even if you transfer

your website. Ask if this service can be covered under a separate contract from the website development.

Website ownership – No matter who you use, ask who owns the website design and copy if you choose to move. Before you sign the agreement, ask what the termination fees are for each if you decide to break your contract early.

It's a big world and there is a place for the Big Guys as well as for smaller firms such as ours. The important aspect is to get answers that allow you make an informed decision. Understanding what your contract includes before you sign it will save you some headaches and money in the long run. ■

If your website was developed by the “Big Guys”, do you know:

- What, specifically, you've contracted for?
- When your contract is up?
- Who at your firm receives and reviews your website analytics report?
- Who your account representative is for each service you've contracted for?
- If you received what you contracted for this quarter, e.g., article syndication, website refresh, etc.

We have extensive experience untangling the knots that are stopping you from getting all you can from your online marketing.

For more information on law firm and attorney marketing, contact Berbay Corp:

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