

Special Report: Upgrading Your Law Firm's Website

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A law firm website offers clients, prospects, the media and other visitors quick and easy access to information about a firm not readily accessible from any other source: attorney bios, practice area descriptions, publications, and more. As such, more than ever, businesses and consumers are using the Internet to locate, research and hire law firms. For instance, a recent survey of in-house counsel reported that:



- 89% use search engines to find law firm websites
- 65% have used the Internet to hire a law firm
- 38% search online for legal services at least weekly

The message is clear: law firms without an effective, professional website risk losing new business to competitors who are more savvy about using the Internet as a marketing tool.

Yet, despite their critical importance to a firm's marketing efforts, many law firm websites remain outdated – having been designed and launched several years ago when Internet marketing technologies were far less advanced than they are today. As a result, many law firms are not capitalizing on new technologies that would simplify site maintenance, improve site usability, and more effectively and creatively use a website to promote their expertise.

There is no rule of thumb as to how often the technology running a law firm website should be upgraded. However, at a minimum, a firm should perform a site audit at least once a year (either internally or with an outside vendor) to determine the areas where its website may be falling short and to identify new technologies that can help deliver a greater ROI on the firm's web presence.

This article will review functional improvements that a firm should consider when auditing its website.

1. Improved Content Management

In the early days of the Internet, whenever a law firm had to update its website, it called the company that developed the site to make the change. Such simple changes as adding or deleting an attorney bio or posting a new press release required the services of a programmer.

No more. These days, if your firm has to call a programmer to make basic site changes, your site sorely needs an upgrade. Specifically, there now exists what is known as content management software ("CMS" in the trade) that allows firm administrators with no technical background

whatsoever to easily and instantly add or delete site content on their own without any technical assistance, including such tasks as uploading photos and documents, or creating hyperlinks.

The advantages of a CMS in terms of maintaining the utility and search engine visibility of a website cannot be stressed enough. Sites that can't be easily updated internally do not get updated frequently since it is a pain to call a programmer and walk him or her through the changes needed, and then to proof those changes for accuracy. The result is a stale site that is ignored by search engines programmed to favor sites with fresh content that is regularly updated. A stale site is also unappealing to visitors looking for timely content relevant to their current needs. Indeed, stale site content can become a source of embarrassment or even liability if, for example, a firm leaves old articles on its website discussing legislation or court decisions that are no longer good law.

In contrast, sites running on a CMS get updated frequently because it is so easy for a firm administrator to edit site content on a self-service basis. The result is a constant stream of fresh content that gets noticed by search engines and is appreciated by visitors.

Additionally, while a CMS software license costs substantially more than standard site hosting, a CMS should pay for itself by eliminating the hourly fees a firm might otherwise pay a programmer to make site changes that firm staffers can now make themselves. With a CMS, the firm can limit the use of outside vendors to projects that truly require advanced programming skills.

2. Improved Site Navigation

Another issue a periodic website audit will uncover is poor site navigation. Ask yourself these questions:

- Can visitors quickly find the information they need to decide if your law firm has the expertise to meet their needs?
- Does site navigation conform to “directional norms” so that key sections of the site are where visitors expect them to be?
- Is the overall navigation of the site intuitive?

If the answers to these questions is “no,” (or “not sure”), then your site navigation needs updating

Optimal navigation for a law firm website is achieved when related content is displayed together. What does that mean? For example, an attorney bio page should not be limited to display of the attorney's biographical information, but should also include links to (i) practice areas in which the attorney is involved, (ii) articles written by the attorney, and (iii) client success stories in which the attorney was involved.

By the same token, a visitor checking out a practice area page should find links to, among other things (i) bios for all attorneys in that practice area, (ii) client success stories achieved by that practice area, and (iii) articles generated by attorneys in that practice area.

The benefit of displaying related content together on the same page is that a visitor can quickly confirm the expertise of a particular attorney or practice group by navigating to site content that establishes such expertise (e.g., articles, success stories). In contrast, if related content is not displayed together, a visitor may never see critical information that might have persuaded him or her about the ability of an individual attorney or the firm to meet his or her needs.

3. Improved Content Distribution

A website is analogous to a retail store. Just like a store sits in a fixed location waiting for customer traffic, a website also resides at a fixed location in cyberspace waiting for visits. Therefore, it follows that just as a retail store must engage in proactive advertising to make consumers aware of the products and services it offers, a law firm should also take proactive steps to distribute samples of website content (e.g., articles, news) as broadly as possible in order to promote its expertise, to draw traffic back to the site, and to generate leads.

New technologies are now available to distribute a firm's site content to a broader audience of potential clients than was previously possible. Consider how many of these technologies your firm's website employs.

A. Email newsletters: does your firm's website offer visitors the opportunity to sign up for email newsletters or alerts? Email newsletters and alerts are a great way to proactively distribute "teaser" content to clients about new decisions, legislation and regulations with "read more" links that take readers back to full articles on the firm's site. Tech savvy firms take things a step further and track what their subscribers are reading so they can identify potential business development opportunities based on demonstrated client interests.

B. RSS: commonly associated with blogs, RSS is a new technology that allows individuals to keep track of new content added to multiple websites without actually visiting those websites. Often identified by little orange icons labeled "XML," RSS feeds make it much easier for prospective clients and media professionals to keep track of news items, alerts or other fresh content that has been added to your website.

C. Podcasts: podcasts are essentially online audio broadcasts. Adding a podcast center to your website adds value for visitors who prefer to obtain information in an audio format. Podcasts can also substantially broaden the distribution of the firm's content through inclusion in directories such as iTunes.

In sum, your firm's website is an extremely valuable marketing asset. Make sure the technology running it doesn't fall behind the times.