

Structuring the Web Site Redesign Effort

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With some luck, your firm already has a Web site. However, a lot of law firm Web sites were built years ago with the help of a veteran partner and a legal secretary — both with minimal or no exposure to best business practices. Today, law firms are quickly realizing that the global market requires us to have a strategic and professional Internet presence, or we risk losing good business to other firms.

As a result, law firms are granting their (newly hired) legal marketers the green light to redesign the firm Web site. This sounds great — but is it an impossible task? No. Redesigning or developing a Web site from scratch is time-consuming, but with the proper guidance, resources and support, it can be a highly successful endeavor.

Now that you have the green light to proceed with this project, you must strategically structure the project in order to make it happen on time and within your budget.

CHOOSING A SITE COMMITTEE

As with any major project related to the law firm, you must first build a committee that can work together to make the critical decisions associated with constructing a Web site. We can all appreciate that building consensus among all interested parties is especially difficult in a law firm environment, which is filled with political preferences and interferences. Here are some helpful hints and rules of thumb necessary to successfully implement this undertaking.

It is critical to form a Web site committee that is diverse, innovative and forward-thinking. In order to get a final product that will appeal to the entire group of potential Web users, the committee must be comprised of various representatives from around the firm, including at least one of the ranked attorneys — partners, of counsel and associates. Each member of rank represents the voice of their counterparts and can speak on areas that are affected by rank-related issues.



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For example, when discussing the topic of attorney biographies, it is important to have the perspective of both the associate and the experienced partner. Both biographies are important, but each will be significantly different from the other, due to different experiences and needs.

It is also necessary to have representation from across different practice areas and geographic locations. The members of a personal law section will have significantly different needs than the litigation team. The committee should represent as many practice areas as possible in order to be sure that each practice is fairly and accurately represented. Similarly, different geographic office locations have different needs for a Web site, so be sure to have at least one representative from each office, if at all possible.

The committee should also include attorneys with innovative ideas and those that are constantly thinking of the future. Individuals who understand technology are great candidates for the committee because they understand the behind-the-scenes tech talk. This group will know what is useful and what is wasteful based on other Web sites that they have used in the past. This unique cluster of members will offer the entire committee insightful knowledge in producing an effective Web site.

The Web site committee should also include at least one non-attorney. For example, a current or recent summer associate can provide helpful insight for the career section. Their feedback and constructive criticism can provide immeasurable advice to the committee. Similarly, actively involving other firm administrative offices is also helpful human resources, for example, will want to have some input when it comes to their needs for staff and professional hiring.

A good representation of age among the committee members is helpful as well. Each age group will provide insight about users like themselves. For example, younger users tend to use the Internet more, and are more comfortable with the latest bells and whistles than older users.

Most or all of the members of your Web site committee should be available to discuss the core elements of your new Web site: the users and key messages, the structure, the functions and the new look. However, non-billable attorney hours are often precious and few. Therefore, as the

core elements of the site are resolved, it may not be necessary for each committee member to contribute as much.

IDENTIFY USERS, MESSAGES

To design a Web site effectively, you need to know who will be using your Web site and what you need to communicate to them. You need to know how your firm differs from other law firms. Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are not always easy to find. If you haven't done this homework with your current clients and potential clients, do it now. You can also survey a cross-section of your attorneys.

Ask clients why they hired the firm, why they continue to work with its attorneys and recommend the firm to others, what they particularly like about your firm's style, work, price, etc. Their answers will give you critical insight as to your firm's Web site users and what the most important messages are. Pay close attention to their answers. What key points engage them? What is important for them to know? What is important for you to know about their business needs?

This can also be a great time to review your brand and clarify your vision. You may want to refine your logo and slogan to hone in on the unique characteristics that differentiate your firm from your competition.

NEW STRUCTURE

A core element of the redesign effort is the structuring of the site. Think of this as the central nervous system of the entire project because it is the foundation of the new site. This aspect deserves a significant amount of time.

The structure of the site is intended to put all of the site's information into a logical order for the end user, the visitor of the site. The site's structure should include at least the basics: sections that describe the firm, the attorneys, the work they do, the career opportunities available, news about the firm and the industries that you serve.

The Web site needs to have one page dedicated to each attorney at your firm. This biography provides visitors with general contact information, as well as the attorney's practice areas, professional qualifications and more. Whether you are establishing or redesigning a new site, putting together the attorney biography is always a much-dreaded task, but they

serve as an immeasurable resource for visitors. Keep in mind that if your budget permits, you can outsource the writing of attorney bios in order to save time and agony.

It is helpful to organize the firm's practice areas and list them alphabetically. Unfortunately, there is no uniform description for practice areas. There are no defined practice areas that spread across the country; every court, state bar association and online database refers to a variety of practice areas, some better defined than others. Use this opportunity to clearly define the services that your firm offers in the broadest sense possible.

The structure should also include a section that describes the firm. Traditionally, an "About Us" page describes the firm, including who the founders were and where they came from (the firm's "roots") and most importantly, where the firm is headed. This is a great opportunity to speak of the founding partners and other key elements that helped to establish the firm, such as specific clients, the business culture of a city, etc.

NEW FUNCTIONS

In today's world of e-business, your site needs to offer functions that appeal to different populations, generations and industries. Some popular functions include the ability to download an attorney's v-card; find attorneys by name, law school, practice area or position; search the site for certain keywords; e-mail the page to a colleague; print the page with an attractive layout; sign up for newsletters or events; find representative cases; and others. Review other Web sites, both from within the legal industry and outside industries, to get an idea of what is beneficial for your users.

A NEW LOOK

If you are serious about building a new Web site, you probably have attended at least one seminar or heard someone say that every law firm Web site looks just like the next. This usually includes photos of handshaking, dignified court steps, law books and Roman pillars. Your Web site's look can differentiate you from the rest of the competition, while also remaining truthful to the firm's roots and the practice of law.

A few tips: Use the colors in your logo — this provides uniformity across all pages and draws connections between various marketing materials. Rather than using traditional legal industry-related images, consider using images associated with the work your firm does. For example, if your firm is located in the northwestern United States and focuses on employment law, consider using images consistent with that area's economy.

The site's new look must be refreshing, inviting and informative. It's especially important to provide a lively look for recruitment purposes. •

To design a Web site effectively, you need to know who will be using your Web site and what you need to communicate. If you haven't done this homework with your current clients and potential clients, do it now.
