



Law Firms in 2010: 5 Pillars of Change

Written on December 10, 2009 by [Donna Seyle](#)

By and large, the legal industry has not been comprised of a revolutionary crowd. This should not come as a surprise, if you were listening in whatever law school class discussed the fact that our profession was born of the King's desire to delude his serfs into believing their grievances would be heard by an impartial tribunal. The King appointed his lawyers to represent their claims. The fact that they always lost was somehow ameliorated by the fact that they had been heard. Kings were replaced by rich bankers and corporations, and following legal precedent became the nature of the game. From this scenario, the practice of law grew primarily as an institutionalized industry rather than a profession of independent thinkers.

That being said, there have certainly been evolutionary shifts. The legitimate representation of the common man was actually a fairly modern concept (in the bigger scheme of things) advanced by civil rights activists and plaintiffs' attorneys. Social consciousness produced pro bono work and contingency fees. When the profession began to grow substantially in numbers in the late 20th century, lawyers were finally permitted to market their services to the general public.

But by and large, prestigious law schools, top-ranking students, big law and expensive billable hours have remained the most honored traditions. And then came the great recession of the 21st century. Big law lay-offs. No job offers for summer interns. Clients demanding discounts. Web 2.0 infiltrating business and professional management. And the independent thinking on the social media train picking up ferocious speed.

So what are we left with? A profession in the midst of such fundamental change that it will never be the same, even in the opinion of the most conservative thinkers. In a recent panel discussion entitled [Defining the Law Firm of the Future](#), the only point on which there was consensus was this: "The firm that will thrive in the future is the firm that is able to deliver better value through innovation and technology."

VALUE. INNOVATION. TECHNOLOGY. How do we start? Below I'm listing what I call the 5 pillars of change that will hopefully help to organize your thoughts around where to begin.

1. [Develop and Implement Real Management Practices](#). The article "[The Best Advice on How to Prepare for a Legal Services Revolution](#), (Law Society Gazette), states that the goal is to "identify a strategy that maximises [their] chances of success, whatever the future holds." This requires deciding which part of the market you want to succeed in and, given where you are, determining what you need to do to get there. It includes all the elements of a full business-plan assessment focused on your strengths, weaknesses, your market and competition. It requires a customer-focused mind-set. Without this process, you will not be able to do the rest. Do this yourself, hire a consultant, but get it done (and read the article!).
2. [Educational Marketing](#). Notice I did not say "social media marketing." Because although it is done through the use of social media, it is marketing by creating a professional online presence that reflects the desire to educate both yourself and your clients. It is accomplished by engaging, connecting and adding value. There are two components to this type of marketing: a) Blogging: The value of blogging regularly cannot be overstated. It is where all three goals of this new strategy come together: value, innovation and technology; b) Use of Social Networks: Yes, you must be on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. They each serve a different function, and work in conjunction with your blog to bolster your online presence. For lawyers, there are also several must-participate sites: [JDSupra](#), [Justia](#), [Martindale-Hubbell Connected](#) and [Avvo](#) are among the most prominent.

3. Using a Virtual Practice Platform. There are many choices of how, and to what degree, to use web 2.0 services to take advantage of the time and cost saving benefits of this expanding business model. In The Virtual Law Office: Not Your Father's Cloud, I discuss how I function virtually, but the choices are many and varied. Investigate them all to decide what you are comfortable with, and how each choice best serves you and your clients.
4. Alternative Billing. Every thought leader in the industry agrees hourly fee structures are going, going, gone for good, and value-based pricing and other models are quickly being developed and implemented by firms large and small. You must begin to incorporate variable fee structures into your practice.
5. Using Free Online Resources. From research tools to trial-preparation applications, free web-based resources are available to you as cost and time-saving devices. Take advantage of them to help take the stress out of your work and budget.

The Law Practice Management Section of the American Bar Association is significantly involved in developing resources to help lawyers through what is truly one of the most revolutionary periods in our profession. While we may not have roots in a revolutionary frame of reference, this is an exciting and dynamic time to be a lawyer. If you are reading this, then you must be on the hunt to learn what the future holds. Embrace it!