



*The Top 10 Law Firm
Website Best Practices*

August
2011

I. Introduction – Do Websites Still Matter?

While social media is all the rage nowadays, websites remain a mainstay of a law firm's online presence. Whether via Google, a referral, or other source, prospective clients come to your website to learn about your firm's experience and track record, and to determine whether your attorneys have the expertise to meet their needs.

For example, as an indicator of the importance of a professional website in the B2B arena, in a recent survey of general counsel, 100% of respondents indicated that they always review a firm's website when evaluating and purchasing legal services, while 90% of respondents reported that lawyer biographies are the most important section of a law firm's website.

A website that is well-designed, easily navigated, and populated with useful content projects expertise, attention to detail, and technological savvy – key qualities that clients look for in a law firm.

On the other hand, settling for an outdated, poorly designed website is, as one general counsel aptly put it, "like showing up to a meeting in a crumpled suit."

Deploying a law firm website that attracts visitors, holds their attention and converts them into leads, requires compliance with "best practices." To that end, this white paper will review the top 10 law firm website best practices.

"Candidly, a bad law firm web site would be like showing up to a meeting with me in a crumpled suit."

General counsel,
consumer goods company

II. Top Ten Law Firm Website Best Practices

#1: Highlight Expertise on the Homepage

When prospective clients arrive at your homepage, you have only a few moments to grab their attention. What they are looking for is evidence that you can meet their legal needs.

In the B2B arena, prospects don't think in terms of "practice areas" – that's an internal firm organizing principle. Rather, they think in terms of their industry – "I am an executive in the oil industry," or "I am general counsel of a bank." As such, it's important to highlight the firm's successes in industries where it has a strong track record and seeks additional business.

In the B2C arena, stressing areas of practice where the firm has achieved successful results is key.

Many firms resort to Flash animation on their homepages for these purposes, but that's a mistake nowadays since Flash animation is not search-engine friendly, and Apple's ubiquitous computing devices don't even support Flash.

A better solution for homepage interactivity is a navigable Javascript slideshow that uses strong visuals to draw visitors in and walk them through some of the firm's success stories.

Use the firm's homepage to highlight the firm's successes in particular industries or areas of the law.

#2: “Deep Link” From the Homepage to Content on Interior Pages

Experts agree that using keyword rich links on the homepage to niche content available on the interior pages of your website – called “deep linking” – provides important search engine optimization (SEO) benefits.

Further, if these links are continually updated as new content is added, then Google will view the site’s content as fresh instead of stale, and index it more frequently.

For example, a law firm might regularly refresh its homepage with links to recent firm news, success stories, and publications. Aside from the SEO benefit, this strategy also directs visitors to your most timely content.

At the same time, linking to content used by prospective clients to evaluate expertise such as practice area or industry pages is also helpful.

Regularly refreshing the links on the homepage to site content on interior pages provides SEO benefits.

#3: Use Site Management Software That Supports Compliance With SEO Best Practices

There are a host of SEO best practices that Google recommends to maximize search engine visibility.

Among them are:

- Composing unique meta title and description content for each page on the website
- Employing search engine-friendly URL’s
- Enclosing key descriptive content on pages in H1 tags
- Utilizing an XML sitemap

To realize the benefits of these SEO “best practices” it is important to use site management software that supports them.

#4: Support Sharing of Content Across Social Media Channels

A key goal of your website should be to promote sharing and broad distribution of your firm’s content across multiple channels. This can be accomplished in several ways.

First, deploying a “social sharing” button on each page of the website encourages visitors to share interesting content with their networks on social media sites such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Second, configuring RSS feeds for key site sections allows visitors to remain continually updated about new site content even after they leave the site. This encourages repeat visits, as well as expanded distribution since you are constantly placing new site content in front of interested third parties that they may share with their networks.

Support sharing of your site content on social media sites.

Additionally, RSS feeds support display of your content on third party websites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Thus, for example, if attorneys at the firm publish blogs, links to recent blog posts can be inserted in these attorneys' profiles on LinkedIn and Twitter, and on the firm's Facebook page (if it has one).

#5: Integrate Multimedia Content

Multimedia content such as videos and podcasts can help with search engine visibility since Google tries to serve up results with a mix of content types.

It's also accepted that different individuals like to absorb information in different formats. Some like to read, some like to listen and some like to watch. Offering multimedia content recognizes and addresses this reality.

Video also provides visitors with an opportunity to evaluate a lawyer's demeanor, presence and communication style.

Multimedia content can help with search engine visibility and client evaluation of expertise.

#6: Import Content From Outside Sources

Many attorneys publish blogs, participate in webcasts, or "tweet" on Twitter, but fail to integrate content from these channels into their websites. What they're missing is that more than just brochures, law firm websites are now publishing platforms.

Integrating outside content sources provides visitors with further evidence of expertise and thought leadership. It also promotes traffic to those other content resources since, as noted, websites are frequently the starting point in the process of evaluating a firm and its attorneys.

Finally, since "inbound links" are an important component of search engine visibility, linking to outside sources maintained by the firm provides those sources with "link juice" that helps boost their own visibility in Google's index.

#7: Display Related Content Together With Contextual Sidebars

What are contextual sidebars? In a nutshell, this tool enables a site to display links to content in the sidebar of any page that is related to the content being displayed in the main body of the page.

For example, an attorney bio page typically displays a lawyer's contact information, relevant experience and personal background such as admissions and education. A contextual sidebar on an attorney bio page would add links to site content "related to" the attorney such as the attorney's practice areas, recent articles, and success stories. It could also highlight firm news in which the attorney was involved.

Contextual sidebars simplify navigation and assist with the evaluation process.

Contextual sidebars facilitate a prospective client's evaluation process by simplifying navigation. When contextual sidebars are available, someone evaluating the suitability of an attorney doesn't need to start searching elsewhere on the site for further evidence of the attorney's expertise. Instead, evidence of that expertise is served up to them directly on the attorney bio page.

By the same token, contextual sidebars can reinforce an attorney's expertise for existing clients.

#8: Simplify Navigation

Best practice #7 highlighted how contextual sidebars facilitate navigation. Indeed, simplified navigation is one of the most critical ingredients of a positive visitor experience.

Other tools to simplify navigation include:

- Using “persistent” navigation across the website (i.e., navigation doesn’t change irrespective of the page on which a visitor finds himself or herself)
- Employing drop down menus in horizontal navigation bars (or “accordion” effects in vertical navigation)
- Utilizing “breadcrumb” navigation on interior pages
- Following navigational conventions such as inserting a logo in the upper left corner linking back to the homepage.

Simplified navigation is one of the most critical ingredients of a positive visitor experience.

#9: Encourage Continued Engagement With Forms

Since most visits to a website are of short duration, it’s important to provide your visitors with mechanisms for continued engagement with your firm. We previously mentioned RSS feeds as a tool to promote ongoing contact. Another feature addressing this need is a subscription form for email communications such as alerts and newsletters. When visitors subscribe to your email communications, they are authorizing you to communicate with them via email on a proactive basis concerning new legal developments relevant to their businesses. Periodic, professional email communications help reinforce a firm’s expertise, boost site traffic, and (with tracking technology) help pinpoint client interests.

Adding an online contact form on the firm’s Contact Us helps encourage visitors to submit inquiries.

Finally, online registration forms helps maximize attendance at firm events by simplifying the registration process.

#10: Monitor Site Traffic

After your website launches, it’s important to monitor the sources of traffic to your website (such as search engines or third party referrals) so you can understand what content and search engine strategies are working, and tweak your site content and navigation accordingly. It’s also helpful to observe how visitors navigate your website so you can understand their thought processes, and what content they find most useful.

The two key tools for this purpose are Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools. Make sure to activate accounts for each, and then have your developer insert the tracking code provided by Google into your website to begin monitoring.

III. Conclusion

To maximize the contributions of a website to a law firm’s marketing and business development efforts, it’s vital that the website comply with the “best practices” outlined in this white paper. In turn, compliance requires utilizing a website developer offering strong graphic design talent and site management software that supports “best practices.”