

# Lawyer Profiles: Dropping the Middle Initials

Steve Matthews | September 2010

I'm impressed with a recent post by Bob Ambrogi titled [The Art & Science of Lawyer Profiles](#). If you haven't seen it already, do yourself a favour and take a look. Whether you're in the process of drafting your own profile, or helping someone else, it's solid advice.

I'm now going to use Bob's post to go off on a tangent, and talk about something that appears deceptively mundane: the use of middle initials by lawyers, and the fallout it causes online.

Part of the professional status associated with being a lawyer includes maintaining a sense of formality. When it comes to the use of initials on websites, and in particular for lawyer profiles, this formality seems to have carried forward. Think about, for example, the three-letter monikers lawyers use in most law firms.

In every firm I've ever worked for, I could tell you the name of each lawyer by their first, middle, and last initial. Even scarier, to me at least, is that I can still tell you the "lawyer initial conflicts" between those firms. Think about how many firms you've known where email addresses were assigned by that three-letter abbreviation, rather than by first and last name? I'll bet you know a few.

All of which is to say, lawyer love their initials. Now, when it comes to law firm websites, or any online profile page for that matter, this formality ends up causing some problems. A lawyer's profile should back up his or her other marketing efforts, both online and offline. If you give a presentation, or write a paper, or impress people in any sort of way, they are going to conduct an online search to find you. Now for the big question: **which names are they going to search by?**

Unless you've spent a career branding yourself around your initials — e.g., F. Lee Bailey, E.F. Hutton — *no one* is going to be searching for you that way. Very few people can brand themselves with the use of an initial — and I would suggest that if F. Lee Bailey was starting his career in 2010, he couldn't either.

Lawyers might still treasure their formalities, but the informality of the web is trickling down through all our online behaviour and interactions, including how we search. We also know that with the search engines, *things have to match*. You can't go by "Ernie Johnston" to the world at large, then write your lawyer profile name as "Ernest P. E. Jonhston, Esq." People won't find you. And they especially won't find you if there are 35 other Ernie Johnstons in Google.

---

Steve Matthews is the Founder and Principal of Stem Legal, a company dedicated to bringing web visibility to the legal industry. A prolific blogger, Steve co-founded the Canadian legal blogging cooperative Slaw ([www.slaw.ca](http://www.slaw.ca)), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy ([www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog](http://www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog)) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog ([www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com](http://www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com)). Steve can be reached at [steve@stemlegal.com](mailto:steve@stemlegal.com).



Now, let's turn this post back to the practical. I'd like to offer a few tips.

Our goal is to have the maximum number of lawyers in your firm rank #1 in Google for the most common version of their "firstname lastname". So:

- put that 'Firstname Lastname' combination at the very beginning of each page's title tag. If the law firm's name must be in there, relegate it to the very end of the page's title tag.
- use the alternate versions of names (short form, nicknames) in brackets in your title tags: *e.g.* Lawrence (Larry) Smith;
- drop middle initials wherever possible, in the alternative, you can get away with leaving the formal name on-page, *if* you alter both:
  - the URL string: example: <http://www.stemlegal.com/steve-matthews/> and not /steven-a-matthews/', and,
  - the Title Tag: although matching *all* the page attributes is preferable, varying the webpage's title tag to the less formal version is a reasonable fall-back position.
- Support the common form name using internal link text within the website. Any time you mention an online publication within your firm's web network, be sure the author citation uses the less formal 'firstname lastname' as the words over which you place the link.

*This article originally appeared on Slaw.ca.*