

Web Law Predictions for 2012

Steve Matthews | December 2012

Creating an annual roundup of legal web technology predictions was never on my personal "to do" list. Rather, it was an accidental offering started here at Slaw a few years ago. Now, much like repeated broadcasts of "It's a Wonderful Life," it's somehow become a holiday tradition.

Some of these predictions pick up on current trends, and extend my own perspective of how that trend might play out in the legal market. Others ideas are clearly more "blue sky," my honest attempts at swinging for the fences (or more accurately, my emulations of the Mighty Casey). Either way, this is always a fun column, and one I now look forward to writing each December.

So enjoy the 2012 forecast attempts, and please consider lobbing in a couple of your own predictions in the comments!

Responsive Web Designs: I believe 2012 will be the year firms *do something* to respond to the question: "how mobile friendly is our law firm website?" Cross-browser testing must now include smart phones and tablets; and firms will respond by detecting media and screen size, and delivering a customized design for each interface. Fixed-width and minimum-width designs are finally dying! And the application of *fluid grids* [<http://www.alistapart.com/articles/fluidgrids/>] will allow firms to maximize their website's presentation for all mobile devices.

Layering of Cloud Tools: In 2011, we saw many cloud services announcing their integration or compatibility with different complementary online products. I see this as a trend that will only accelerate in 2012: more companies will offer APIs to their services, transferring data between cloud products will become easier, and most important, *newer layered products* will emerge. On a bigger scale, companies like Google are already layering services. But in the legal market, you can anticipate products like integrated client dashboards, or accounting data merged with CRM. Integrations that took place behind the firewall in law firms over the past 15 years will emerge in 2012 as part of the public web infrastructure.

Firms Abandon Content, Blame Subsequent Failures on Social Media: Jumping into a trend midstream has never been easier, and law firms will demonstrate this in 2012 with their social media tactics. Expect more critical mass adoption, with many firms passing on blogging and other forms of professional commentary in hopes that their offline-reputation translates to the web. Few will succeed! We can also expect to see those same firms blame their failures on Twitter and Facebook. Having 'original commentary that resonates' may be an old school concept for many of us, but if 2011 was any indication, there's a boatload of social media failures coming in 2012.

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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), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy (www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog (www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com). Steve can be reached at steve@stemlegal.com.



Google-Facebook Bidding War Over Twitter: I'm taking a flyer on this one. Facebook and Google are obviously going toe-to-toe in the social media platform space. Twitter, on the other hand, continues in its simplicity, emerging as *the* place to grab an immediate pulse on pretty much any topic. This makes me see Twitter as a tipping point agent, the catalyst to being the market leader in social media – a position that Facebook has, and Google wants badly. So my prediction is this: 2012 will see a very public bidding war between Google and Facebook to acquire Twitter. Especially after Facebook IPOs in early 2012, there will be just too much money, too many egos, for one of these companies not to pay dearly.

Non-Lawyer Web Services Will Rise: In the North American market, 'grey area' legal services like LegalZoom and Rocket Lawyer are growing rapidly. And in the UK, non-lawyer Alternative Business Structure (ABS) firms are about to start incorporating businesses in the back of supermarkets and drugstores. These waves of change have already been felt online, but we can expect the competition level to spike further in 2012. More notable, however, is the new approach these companies will take to online legal services – it won't be standard fare! These companies don't have the same ethical guidelines that direct lawyers to behave professionally. And while some will get their knuckles wrapped for UPL, still these services will be more aggressive, more consumer focused, and better able to delve into tactics (*e.g.* referral marketing) most firms avoid.

Google Search Will Be Driven By Local and Social: In case anyone hasn't noticed, Google is transforming itself to compete with Facebook. Changes can be seen network-wide, but we can point to Google+ and the new navigation bar [http://www.pcworld.com/article/245193/new_google_navigation_bar_is_part_one_of_redesign.html] as prime examples of what's coming. While it's hard to believe Google's homepage, long admired for its simplicity, could be at risk, I would say the groundwork is being set for many dramatic changes in 2012. As for my predictions, I'll pick two. First, the dial on social circle engagements will be turned up even higher with respect to Google's search results. Each person's social network is already showing a growing impact [A related tip here: if you register with Google Webmaster Tools, Google will show you the impact all those *+1s* are having]. And secondly, local search (Google Places) will become even more important, be embedded in more places, and deliver far more exposure than it ever has in the past.

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