

Domain Name Issues for Law Firms

Steve Matthews | February 2010

These days, it's a given that within its collection of web properties, a law firm must have its own website. Every year, the legal industry spends a pretty penny hiring consultants, designers and copywriters to produce a website that will serve as the firm's online headquarters.

Much attention is given (at least we hope it is...) to the aesthetics: colour and font choices, graphical images, photos, etc. And if the firm is smart, the actual content of the website is given just as much consideration. But what about the site's most basic, fundamental element: *the domain name*? How much thought is given to the URL that firms hope their potential clients will click on in their search results?

This article will address some of the common issues lawyers and firms face when deciding on a domain name, as well as some more sophisticated tactics that may be taken advantage of. A little time spent considering domain name options up front can often result in benefits down the road.

The Top Level Domain (TLD)

Top level domains are the end part of the URL: the .com, .ca, .org, .net, etc. Perhaps the most common issue most Canadian firms will encounter is whether to choose a .ca or a .com domain.

Generally speaking, a .ca domain is given some preference in the search results for those searches conducted within Canada's borders. Thanks to Google's geotargetting algorithms (the next Web Law Connected column will focus on this topic), choosing a .ca domain tells the search engines that your site is self-defined as Canadian content.

While having a .ca domain gives you a definite advantage in the Canadian search results, the other part of the equation is knowing if your audience is distinctly *and exclusively* Canadian.

What if you're a bigger firm that hopes to attract the attention of international searchers? In this situation, you'll want to consider whether a .com domain will help make your site more visible to searchers outside of Canada. Usually, the answer is "yes".

The Domain Name

Now that you've chosen an appropriate TLD, the fun part: the domain (the principal part of the URL). Most often, this will be the firm's name, or an abbreviation or acronym for the full name – the "stemlegal" in www.stemlegal.com.

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The best advice at this point (if the domain name is available) is for firms to lock up their brand name. Identify a reasonably short name variation – drop a couple name partners if necessary – and register **both the .com and .ca**. Budget restrictions aside, the .org, .net and .info would also be \$30/year well spent.

But we often see keyword-based domain names, too, such as www.newjerseycriminallawattorney.com. This is especially common with blog URLs.

The advantage of these types of domains is that they naturally rank quite well for the search phrases they include, without a lot of work on the webmaster's behalf. Because of this, endless variations of geographic/practice-based domains are snatched up pretty quickly. Opinions will differ on this next point, but I would suggest keyword domains are most appropriate for:

- boutique practices;
- solos and small firms; or
- content-based web properties like blogs or microsites.

If you do decide to go for a keyword-rich domain, be warned: concise, accurate domains are becoming much harder to get. Look for a domain that has your desired search term targets, in the same keyword order, ideally, and three words or less in length.

How do you figure out what your desired search term targets are? The Google Keyword Research tool [<https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal>] tells us how many people are searching for a given keyword or phrase every month. This tool is free, insightful, and you should use it!

If you can find an appropriate phrase with a relatively high volume of searches, and the equivalent domain is available for a good price, it may be worth registering or purchasing from another party. Even if you don't use it for your firm website, you could keep it handy for that blog you've been wanting to start.

Valuing Domains: Whether to Register (or Purchase)

Brand-oriented domains are pretty straightforward for me. Find an acceptable budget for protecting the firm's IP, and then lock them down long term. For important domains, I'd suggest at least 10 years, and even consider Network Solutions long-term registrations [<http://www.networksolutions.com/domain-name-registration/pricing-chart.jsp>].

Keyword-rich domains are particularly valuable if they: 1) accurately reflect the practice area and geographic location of your services, and 2) the phrase is actually one that people type into the search engines!

I put a lot of emphasis on factor #2. Having search volume is extremely important when considering the value of any domain name.

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Other factors:

Gauging your market: Every market is different — just because of disparity in populations, search volumes in say, Saskatchewan will be significantly lower than volumes in Ontario. To get a better sense, compare phrases with the same words but in a different order; or compare phrases with broader or narrower geographic terms (replace city references with provinces).

When to Buy –vs- When to Register: Deciding whether the price is good is an important question. A basic .com domain registration can be had for about \$10/year – a drop in the bucket and something you shouldn't waffle over. But a more valuable, desirable domain – often owned by another party -can cost much more than that.

In the end, you must decide whether a business case can be made for the investment of a pricey domain. Personally, I don't advise lawyers to purchase domains from third parties unless all other alternative names (singular vs. plural terms, for example.) have been considered. Even then, Lawyers should consider using an anonymous negotiation service over direct email communication – having a JD or LLB after your name screams \$\$\$ to domain speculators.

Conclusion

One final point on domain names is the importance of sticking with your choices once you've made them. Aged domains and the corresponding incoming links to your website can be valuable trust factors for the search engine rankings. That doesn't mean that firms can't move their principal domain, but that they should seriously weigh the drawbacks before doing so. If you've spent 10 or 15 years building up that location, even with the appropriate redirect technology, I wouldn't expect that success to be replicated overnight.

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