

# Worst Practices in Web Marketing

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If your firm has a bad website, it will actually *cost you new business*. At one point in the buying process, the decision-maker who hires law firms will visit your website. General counsel tell me that if the site looks homemade, or is based on a cheap template, or is missing the information they are looking for – they’ll pass over the law firm.

Don’t let this happen to you. Here is my list of the Worst Practices committed online by lawyers. Don’t miss the “parade of horrors” at the end of this article, and make certain they don’t appear on your website.

**No. 1: No indication that the site is operated by a lawyer.** Some law firm websites feature fancy Flash animation, or pictures of their offices (with no one in them), and text that describes how the firm has integrity. But many law firm websites appear to be more like travel agency sites – they have pictures of city skylines and views of the surrounding environs. This is a mistake. If a buyer can’t tell what kind of store he’s in, he’s unlikely to buy anything.

**No. 2: No articles or white papers.** According to research by TouchPoint Metrics, which interviewed numerous marketing executives, articles and white papers written by their firms’ lawyers helped generate Website traffic that resulted in new clients. Obviously, the failure to demonstrate your lawyer’s expertise is a major flaw on a law firm Website.

**No. 3: The Website does not reflect the rest of the firm’s marketing.** A firm’s Website offers an excellent opportunity to brand and position the firm. The addition of tag lines coupled with content that describes the firm’s unique selling proposition is another area of opportunity. But having a “stand-alone” website, which does not match a firm’s printed marketing materials or which doesn’t carry the firm’s marketing message is a missed opportunity.

**No. 4: Saying you are a full-service firm.** Let’s be honest here – there are probably only 100 law firms in the U.S. that are truly full-service firms that can handle **every** matter a company or individual can throw at them. Yet many other firms claim to be “full service” firms and it hurts their marketing efforts, because buyers of legal services interpret the phrase to mean “all purpose firm” or “jack of all trades, master of none.” What clients really want is *an expert in solving their particular problem*. Accordingly, it’s better to spell out the aspects of your firm that make it unique, not what it does in general.

**No. 5: Displaying a cheap-looking site.** Examples include sites with a lot of clip art and trite legal images of gavels, blind justice and columns. Other sites have an overall home-made look and or are clearly based on a generic template. Remember that your Website is a very public presence that is running 24 by 7 by 365. Spend enough money to put online several sharp pictures of client industries on your website. Use a content management system that allows you to update the site easily and frequently. Don't use it as a place to save money.

**No. 6: Have a client develop your site.** In my experience, this is always a big mistake. A partner will think they are doing the client a favor by giving them a project, or that the law firm will save money in the process. This rarely turns out to be the case. Instead both parties eventually find themselves in an uncomfortable situation where the law firm is not happy with the client's work. I've seen cases where the law firm has had to fire the developer, and lost a client in the process. My recommendation is to bid out the development work, and choose a Web supplier who has no entanglements with the firm.

**No. 7: Hire a Web developer with no experience with the legal profession.** It really is true: lawyers are different from other business people. Law firms are not at all like new-age Web 2.0 ventures that want to go online.

- Lawyers must abide by mandatory ethics provisions and use many precise terms of art.
- Lawyers are risk averse, precedent driven and uncomfortable with marketing (which is not taught in law school).
- They make decisions based on consensus, not by the order of a CEO.
- Lawyers have unique personalities – they are typically smart, uncomfortable with graphics concepts and happy with miles of text.

These are not the elements that add up to a successful experience for the uninitiated Web developer.

**No. 8: Put up generic content.** By this I mean boilerplate like “we pursue traditions of excellence,” or “we adhere to the highest ethical standards,” or “we hire the brightest students from the best law schools.” This meaningless blather is kindly referred to as “broadly descriptive content.” Instead law firms should display their industry experience, list of representative clients and matter-specific success stories.

**No. 9: Confusing Layout.** Examples of this mistake include putting up yards of text; too many links, choices and options; Flash or other animated graphics; elements that require a software download to use; and text which is actually a graphic. All these mistakes violate the rules of web site usability, that a visitor should be able to find what he wants on your Website without a set of instructions on how to use it.

**No. 10: No extranet.** Clients love extranets. They present an online opportunity for law firms to enhance client services, by giving a client a password to check on their files and key dates in

their matter. Failure to offer clients a password-protected extranet is a missed chance to deepen relationships with clients.

### The parade of horrors

Let me conclude with three items that should *never* appear on a law firm website. Among the things that business people don't care about and don't want to read will include:

- **A Welcome Message.** This is regarded as "happy talk" that adds nothing to a visit to the site. These messages often contain the firm's mission, the high principles the firm adheres to, and a lot of other material no one cares about. It's a holdover from the early days of the Web (way back in 1996) when people thought it was necessary to explain what they were looking at.
- **The Firm History.** Typically this is illustrated with sepia-toned photos of Model T cars and views of Main Street before it was paved. The firm history will start with Lawyer A, a white male who was probably the commander of the local fort. One day he met Lawyer B, who represented the general store, and they founded the law firm. Lo, these many years later, the firm is still here. All law firm histories are the same and few visitors want to read them.
- **A Links Page.** This is another holdover from the early days of the Web are the pages that link to other sites. This is a mistake, because all it does it take traffic away from your site. Further it assumes that visitors will use the law firm site to conduct research. This is usually not the case, because visitors will use travel and chamber of commerce sites to find out about the locale and will go to Westlaw and Lexis for legal research.

For more on this topic, call:

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