What matters: Offering Technology that Clients *Want*

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Lawyers have increased their marketing tech-savviness tremendously in the last five years. Today, lawyers have Flash on their websites, write thousands of blogs and exchange notes on "wiki" workspaces. This is all good, but from a business development standpoint, it's not what clients *want.*

To get and keep clients, a lawyer must offer unglamorous technology like e-billing, software that allows online collaboration and methods to share information. None of this is the sexy "Web 2.0" technology that pundits like to write about. Clients want basic, practical tech applications that make doing business with you easier.

"OK, Mr. hot stuff-big shot attorney, answer me this question . . . Why should I, hire you?" said Theodore L. Banks Chief Counsel, Global Compliance Kraft Foods. "For example, what kind of cool technology does your firm use that is so much better than the competition?"

E-billing. This is at the top of the list, according to Toby Brown, client relations manager of Fulbright & Jaworski. The idea is to offer clients a tech "round trip": electronic billing presentment *and* payment. The reason clients love e-billing is that they can easily tell if they're being overcharged (padding your hours is a business development killer. The instant overcharging is detected by the client, you are fired.) In fact, the first year that Microsoft started using e-billing it identified several million dollars in law firm overcharges, according to Brown, who spoke with Theodore Banks at ABA Techshow in Chicago.

The good news for you is that you will get paid faster with e-billing. "By using e-invoicing, we will be able to process invoices more efficiently. Each invoice, whether it comes from a small firm or a large firm, will include the same source data so we will be better able to mine and analyze the information with the same level of detail," said Ron R. Denton, Business Services Manager – Legal Department, ConocoPhillips Company.

E-billing companies to consider are DataCert, Serengeti, e-Billing Hub and Bridgeway.

Extranets and Online Collaboration Tools. Extranets were new 15 years ago, but clients still love 'em. They are password-protected web pages where clients can exchange and edit documents with you in a secure environment. "We always ask new clients if they'd like to collaborate online with a secure extranet," Brown said. This is technology at its best use – to eliminate 100-page faxes, hand-delivery of documents and emailing confidential work product. A company that is a favorite of many lawyers is LawPort, see http://www.svtechnology.com/content.aspx?publtemID=114.

Another important service is technology allows that allows you to share volumes of e-discovery documents online. A popular choice is Ringtail, at http://www.ftiringtail.com/web/audience/Law_Firms.html, which can handle tens of millions of documents and is available around the clock.

Free Client CLE. Web seminars are extremely popular because neither the speakers nor the attendees have to travel to attend the program. My co-editors and I offer two practice development Webinars per month at www.PBDI.org. Clients love it when a lawyer presents a program that is custom-designed for their business problems.

For example, I worked with a lawyer in Illinois who wanted to promote her immigration practice. The firm's clients were scattered across several states, and it was impractical for her to visit each one individually. So she created a PowerPoint slide show entitled, "Form I-9 Compliance and Other Immigration Issues for Employers," which covered laws on documenting that an employer did not hire illegal immigrants. Invitations were sent to all the firm's employer clients, who could attend the program for $185 per connection. Clients would view the program on a password-protected website, and dial a toll-free number to hear her speaking. It was a huge success and the attendance fees more than covered the cost of the program.

To present a webinar you need a web company that will display the slides online and offer a phone bridge for attendees to call. There are dozens of these companies, including WebEx, Microsoft Live Meeting, KRM Information Services and ConferencePlus.

Online surveys. The two leading services are Zoomerang and SurveyMonkey, which are both easy-to-learn and offer free versions. They allow you to get instant feedback on firm webinars, in-person events and newsletters. You simply create the survey online and then email a link to people whom you want to respond to it. More importantly, they allow you to survey clients or companies within a particular industry and gather data on important issues, which you can then share with clients. Some lawyers have established themselves as industry experts by conducting annual surveys on topics where they want to build a clientele. A one-year subscription to Zoomerang is $600 and is worth every penny.

Short podcasts as client alerts. A podcast is a brief audio recording that can be listened to on the Web or downloaded onto a player. Surprisingly, many grown-up corporate executives have iPods or devices for listening to podcasts, and they listen to them on the drive or train ride after work. ***Originate!*** offers numerous audiocasts for subscribers – check out the blue field at http://www.pbdi.org/originate. The trick is to keep a podcast short – 3 minutes is ideal, but they can run up to 15 minutes. It is essential that the topic be something timely and practical – something a client absolutely needs to know about.

Do-it-yourselfers can record podcasts on handheld recorders or telephone services like FreeConferenceCall.com. There are many services that will help you record a podcast, like Audioblog.com, Envoyglobal.net, and Infinite Conferencing.

CRM (client relationship management) software. CRM software makes it easy for lawyers to develop relationships and get introductions. Operating behind the scenes, CRM software collects the Outlook contact information of all the lawyers in your firm. When you want a report on who knows whom at a target client, you simply print out a report. The more detail you include in your own Outlook Contacts – such as when you last spoke to a contact, when and where you were, and personal information like avocations, names of family members and favorite things – the better. Every sales organization has CRM software, using off the shelf programs like ACT and Salesforce.com, and lawyers should too. The leading firm wide CRM applications are Interaction and ContactEase.

Ted Banks of Kraft said, "We don't just hire megafirms. We love boutiques and we love solo practitioners. The trouble is finding them when we need them. If you can show us technology that shows what you can do, the door is open."