

TechnoLawyer.com: Extra Extra: The Complete Guide to Publicizing a Law Firm Web Site

By: Matthew Mandell, Sandy Ramlet, & Gill E. Wagner

This article originated in The TechnoLawyer Community, a free online community in which legal professionals share information about business and technology issues, products, and services, often developing valuable business relationships in the process. To join The TechnoLawyer Community, fill out the form at the following Web site: www.technolawyer.com.

In this article, Matthew Mandell, Sandy Ramlet, and Gill Wagner have joined forces to discuss the many ways to market, promote, and publicize a law firm Web site. These three marketing mavens cover both cyberspace and traditional advertising and publicity. As an added bonus, most of their tips cost little or no money. If you do not have time to read the entire article, you owe it to yourself and your colleagues to at least read the inside scoop on how to have your firm's Web site rank high in search engine results when prospective clients enter queries. This article won the MasterPost, a writing contest in The TechnoLawyer Community.

Introduction

You work in a law firm. You recently convinced the partnership to build a Web site for marketing and recruiting purposes. You built and launched the site and all the partners think it looks terrific — but at the same time, they want to see a measurable return on their investment within a year. Now what?

Publicizing a new or existing law firm Web site differs dramatically from the practice of law. When legal professionals burn the midnight oil for a client, it's a good bet that the client will pay for that effort. By contrast, time and money spent publicizing a law firm Web site does not guarantee anything. Such are the risks of advertising and publicity. Nonetheless, you cannot generate hits without pitches and so pitch you must. In an effort to prevent you from striking out, we have put our heads together to come up with a comprehensive guide to marketing a law firm Web site. We first discuss cyberspace promotion and then traditional promotion.

Cyberspace Promotion

The Internet seems like the antithesis of a black hole. When information enters a black hole, it disappears forever. The opposite happens to information on the Internet — it becomes accessible to everyone and has remarkable staying power. Even defunct Web sites continue to exist in search engines that could stand some spring cleaning. The litany of cyberspace publicity tips that appears below should help you cut through the Internet's morass of information and reach your target audience.

Search Engines

Everyone uses search engines so you must arrange to have your firm's Web site listed in as many as possible. How many? In a perfect world, all 500 or so. But frankly, you're better off adopting what we call the "90/9 Rule" — 90% of all Internet searches are conducted on nine search engines so focus on them and forget the rest. These nine search engines appear below:

- Alta Vista <<http://www.altavista.com>>
- Excite <<http://www.excite.com>>
- Google <<http://www.google.com>>

- GoTo.Com <<http://www.goto.com/>>
- HotBot <<http://hotbot.lycos.com/>>
- Infoseek <<http://www.go.com/>>
- LookSmart <<http://www.looksmart.com/>>
- Lycos <<http://www.lycos.com/>>
- Northern Light <<http://www.northernlight.com/>>

Most, if not all, of the above search engines contain a form that you can fill out to make them aware of your site's existence. Unfortunately, filling out these forms and getting your firm's Web site listed in these search engines is only the first (and easiest) of two steps. For the second step, you must make sure that the pages in your firm's Web site (or at least the home page) appear in the top 20-30 links returned in a search because most Web surfers will not look past that point. To do this, you need to know how search engines rank URLs. True to the Internet's chaotic nature, none of the search engines use the same algorithms to determine relevancy. However, most of them do follow a general set of guidelines, which we have listed below:

1. URL: Most search engines assume that if a search term appears in a URL, then the pages associated with that URL must be relevant. Thus, if someone searches for "Microsoft," most search engines will list "www.microsoft.com" among the first few links. This ranking methodology demonstrates why it's so important for your firm to have a cognizable domain name — one that people will enter as a search query. The best domain names for law firms typically consist of the name of the firm or the area of specialty (or both — see "URL Redirection" below).

2. Web Page Title: The title of a Web page is not its first line, but rather a mostly invisible word or phrase that appears only in your browser's bookmark and history lists. All the major search engines take the title of Web pages into account when ranking them. Therefore, you should try to title every page in your Web site to reflect likely search terms. Some firms include their name or area of specialty in the title of every page followed by a colon and a more descriptive phrase (e.g., "Smith & Jones: Attorney Biographies").

3. Meta Tags: A meta tag consists of a series of invisible keywords that do not show up in a Web browser, but exist for the benefit of search engines. The object of meta tag design lies in developing a set of keywords that will match the search terms used by people looking for a law firm such as yours. Thanks to the overzealous use of meta tags by Web developers, some search engines now ignore them (e.g., Excite). Nonetheless, others still use meta tags to rank URLs (e.g., HotBot). As a result, you should consider using meta tags — at least on your

firm's home page. You will need to generate a keyword list anyway (see "Body Text" below) so you may as well stick the fruits of your brainstorming in a meta tag — it can't hurt and it could help. Adding a meta tag will require a some fiddling in HTML. If that makes you squeamish or if your visual Web page development program does not allow you see the underlying HTML, you can very easily add meta tags to your Web site at SiteOwner.Com <<http://siteowner.bcentral.com>>, which features a meta tag insertion tool and a variety of other Web site administration tools.

4. Body Text: Naturally, search engines also take into account the actual text of Web pages when making relevancy rankings. For the most part, search engines consider the first few lines of text more important than the other text on a Web page. In light of this fact, try to use as many of the keywords in your meta tag in the first few lines of each Web page — or at least somewhere on each Web page. But don't just list all the keywords at the bottom of the page even if you can hide them by making them the same color as the page background. Savvy Web surfers will know what you've done and may take offense.

To learn more about how search engines work, check out Search Engine Watch <<http://www.searchenginewatch.com/>>.

Yahoo: the Mother of All Internet Directories

Unbeknownst to many people, Yahoo <<http://www.yahoo.com>> does not have a search engine of its own. Instead, it consists of a directory put together by an army of twenty-somethings. Because Yahoo attracts more Web surfers than any other directory or search engine on the Web, you should submit your site. However, unless you pay \$299 for an express evaluation, expect to wait 2-6 months before Yahoo evaluates your submission. When submitting your URL, Yahoo asks that you choose the category in which your URL best fits. Choose carefully. We suggest you start at: <http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Shopping_and_Services/Law>.

Legal-Specific Directories

A plethora of law firm Web site directories exist, the most popular of which of which is FindLaw <<http://www.findlaw.com/>>. Try running a search in one or more search engines (see above) to find other legal-specific directories. In addition, visit the sites of your local bar associations to see if they feature such a directory. Although you should submit your law firm's URL to as many legal-specific directories as you can find, please take heed of the following two caveats. First, some of these directories charge a fee for a listing. Second, do not build a free Web site for your law firm simply for the sake of having it appear in a directory. As explained recently in The TechnoLawyer Community, if your firm builds one or more free Web sites, people may not be able to find its real Web site.

URL Redirection

Experienced Web surfers often bypass search engines and instead try to find Web sites by guessing the URL. Law firms that want to increase the likelihood that these guesses will work can take advantage of "URL Redirection," a feature offered by many ISPs. URL Redirection involves purchasing multiple domain names and reconfiguring them to point to the same Web

site. For example, suppose a firm named "Smith & Jones," which specializes in family law, wants to use redirection to increase the likelihood that people will find its Web site. It could purchase the domain names "smithjones.com," "smith-jones.com," "smith.com," "jones.com," "familylaw.com," "family-law.com," etc. and pay an ISP to redirect all of these domain names to the firm's primary URL. Redirection also has the advantage of preventing your firm's competitors from using these domain names. In addition to paying an ISP for the redirection service, each domain name will cost your firm \$35 per year at current rates. You will have to engage in a cost/benefit analysis to determine whether redirection constitutes a worthwhile investment for your firm.

Community Web Sites

If your firm contributes to its local community by doing pro bono work or making charitable donations, find out if the community can give something back to your firm in the form of banners or links. This quid pro quo may involve the Web site of the local community college or even that of city hall. The Web's regional reach can be even more powerful than its international reach.

Link Trading

If your firm has an affiliation with any organizations, consider trading links with them to drive more traffic to your firm's Web site. Link trading doesn't apply only to local affiliations, but to national ones as well. The Red Cross may not want to link to your firm's site, but it certainly can't hurt to ask. Your best strategy lies in trading links with sites that have more traffic than your site does.

Mailing Lists & Newsgroups

Post messages about your firm's Web site to newsgroups or mailing lists when they blend well with a discussion thread, but do not post blatant ads. In addition, take advantage of sponsorship opportunities. Even better, have your firm start its own mailing list. Your firm could use a mailing list to publish a newsletter and notify its clientele and the media about new features and information on its Web site. It could also launch a discussion mailing list to discuss legal topics in which the firm specializes. The firm's URL can appear at the top of every mailing list message.

E-Mail Signature Lines

Most modern e-mail clients can automatically attach a signature to every e-mail message. Your firm should instruct its lawyers and staff members to include the firm's URL in their automatic signature. Make sure everyone lists the URL in its full "http://" format so that people with Web-enabled e-mail clients can click on it and load the firm's Web site.

Banner Advertising

The Web contains more available advertising space than any other medium. For example, your firm can pay Yahoo to serve up your firm's banner every time someone searches for "car accident" or "personal injury." Alternatively, it could pay a real estate broker to post a banner on its Web site. The list of possibilities is endless. If you choose to go this route, investigate your options thoroughly before plunking down your firm's

money. Make sure the advertising you buy will reach the desired audience.

Respond Promptly to E-Mail Inquiries

Put someone at your firm in charge of responding to e-mail inquiries. You can do this by setting up an address along the lines of "info@yourfirm.com" to be used throughout the Web site. Your firm can then have all e-mail sent to this address redirected to the person responsible for handling such inquiries — probably you since you're the one reading this article.

Traditional Promotion

With the exception of banner ads and redirection services, cyberspace promotion doesn't cost anything but time. Unfortunately, the same is not true of traditional promotion. What can we say — paper and postage cost money whereas bits and bytes do not.

Web Identity

Print your firm's URL on every piece of paper that currently contains its street address. This includes letterhead, envelopes, fax cover sheets, business cards, brochures, newsletters, print advertisements (including ads in Yellow Pages), client bills, and whatever else. If you do not wish to waste your current set of brochures, have a graphic designer create a matching sticker bearing the URL to place on each brochure. Your firm can even add its URL to its outgoing mail if it uses a postage meter, such as those from Pitney Bowes <<http://www.pb.com/>>. The above advice also applies to other traditional media, such as radio and television. Just about every company now flashes its URL at the end of television commercials and so should your firm. Web sites allow people to explore and perform some research before making direct contact.

Media Relations

Write a press release and send it to the media. We recommend that you also send color pictures, video clips, or a diskette containing all of part of the Web site along with the press release. Many newspapers and magazines have begun to run regular columns on the Web, including new or newly-launched Web sites. When putting together your media contact list, don't forget to include the following:

Matthew Mandell runs Melmar Multimedia, a Web design and consulting firm in New York City. Melmar Multimedia has designed Web sites for a number of different law firms. You can contact him via telephone (718-543-2383) or e-mail (matthew@melmar.com), and you can visit his Web site at <www.melmar.com>.

Sandy Ramlet runs Legal Ink, a company that provides marketing communications consulting and writing services for lawyers and law firms. She helps lawyers see through "client-focused" lenses and to communicate clearly with their clients from that vantage point. Before opening her consulting business, Sandy worked at two Denver-based law firms: Holland & Hart and Holme Roberts & Owen. You can contact Sandy via e-mail (sramlet@legal-ink.com).

Gill E. Wagner works with small- to midsize-business owners who want to efficiently share computerized information, using technology that isn't outdated the day it's installed. Gill is a founding partner of Orbtech. You can contact him via telephone (888-416-1440).

To receive more articles like this one free of charge, join the TechnoLawyer Community: www.technolawyer.com.

- Publications read by your firm's clientele.
- Local publications (newspapers and newsletters).
- Local radio and television stations.
- Alumni publications (alma maters of the firm's lawyers).
- Legal newspapers and magazines.

If you have trouble compiling a media contact list on your own, try using a resource such as the "News Media Yellow Book." You can also hire a public relations firm to help you.

Announcements & Reprints

Create a stunning postcard and send it to all your clients and other important contacts when your firm launches its Web site. In addition, when your media relations campaign results in a favorable article, purchase reprints and send them to the same people to whom you sent the postcards. In addition, to the extent a reprint comes from a national publication, send it to local publications. Create a scrapbook of the media coverage your firm's site receives and make it available for clients and visitors to peruse in the firm's reception area.

Respond Promptly to Traditional Inquiries

When reporters call, respond immediately. The same goes for any other telephonic, fax, or snail mail inquiries. Instruct the firm's receptionists to direct prospective clients fishing for information to the Web site.

Conclusion

Publicizing a law firm Web site takes at least as much time as it does to build the site. And like building a Web site, publicity is not a one-time project. You must continually think outside the box (especially if you have a limited promotional budget) and tinker with the formula set forth in this article. If you have a considerable budget, you may want to enlist the help of a marketing specialist or publicist. The bottom line is that you must brainstorm and develop a marketing plan that works for your firm.