

TechnoLawyer.com: Justice Over Java: Seven Steps to a Great Law Firm Web Site

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In this article, Matthew Mandell reminds law firms to engage in what they do best when it comes to shaping the content on their Web site -- take relatively boring factual information and transform it into an interesting story dominated by one or two themes (such as justice and expertise). By following Matthew's seven-step plan, law firms can avoid the pitfall of focusing too much attention on Web site design and not enough on content. This article won the MasterPost, a writing contest in The TechnoLawyer Community.

Introduction

Content is King! As a Web site designer for law firms, I must say it again -- content is king! People retain lawyers because of their special abilities and knowledge. It therefore stands to reason that a law firm's Web site should reflect these abilities and knowledge. Although glitzy graphics may please the eye, most prospective clients reviewing a law firm's Web site are more interested in learning about how that firm can help them resolve their legal problems. Simply put, Web surfers in search of a lawyer care more about Justice than Java.

In this article, I discuss six must-have and one optional content components for law firm Web sites. One proviso before getting underway -- please do not misconstrue this article as a denouncement of Web site graphics and other design elements. On the contrary, I would not recommend a text-only Web site in today's image-hungry society. However, in this article I've limited the discussion to content.

Seven Steps to a Great Law Firm Web Site

1. Corporate Statement

In addition to setting forth your firm's mission statement, discuss the who, what, and where of your law firm. Let the world know how to contact your firm by phone, fax, mail, e-mail, mental telepathy, and so forth (don't omit any form of available communication). This may seem like common sense, but many law firm Web sites omit this information or place it in obscure corners of their Web sites.

2. Practice Areas

Clearly delineate the firm's areas of expertise. Instead of just listing your firm's practice areas, define them and add a few summaries of past cases and/or transactions handled by the firm. Basically, the practice areas segment of a Web site enables a firm to demonstrate its expertise and provide some free information about a given area of law. Remember the governing rule of Internet society -- if you build it, some will come; if you build it and provide valuable information free of charge, many will come! For a good example of how one law firm tackled its practice areas, click your way over to Stark & Stark at <http://www.stark-stark.com>.

3. Attorney Bios

Consider publishing short bios for all the lawyers at your firm. Many firms like to combine the bios with professional photographs. Law firms strapped for cash can create their own Web-ready photos by using one of the many digital cameras currently available. However you decide to approach the concept of bios, don't forget to list each lawyer's e-mail address. This will enable prospective clients to begin a dialogue that may later result in new business. For good examples of lawyer bios, head over to Davis, Polk & Wardwell <http://www.dpw.com>.

4. Articles

Republish the articles that your firm's lawyers and other staff have published in law journals, magazines, newspapers, newsletters, and Webzines. In addition, purchase reprint rights to all favorable press regarding your firm or any of its personnel. Weave these articles into both the practice areas and the bios using cross-reference links. Many personal injury firms list their victories (including dollar amounts) in the articles section of their Web sites (for an example, hop over to Blume Goldfaden's Web site at <http://www.njatty.com>). It goes without saying that the people at your firm who write articles should only grant nonexclusive (as opposed to exclusive) licenses to the publications that publish their articles. This precaution will enable you to republish their articles on your firm's Web site.

5. Breaking News

Many components of a law firm's Web site are static by necessity (practice areas, bios, etc.). A section devoted to breaking news about either the firm or a specific area of law can electrify an otherwise static site and encourage people to return in the future. Be warned -- nothing is worse than a neglected breaking news section so don't forget to update it regularly.

6. Recruiting Information

Law students will expect to find recruiting information on your firm's Web site so don't disappoint them. Not since the mid-1980s have law students enjoyed such a good entry-level job market. Your firm's Web site may not close the deal with a particular student, but it could open the door. The same philosophy applies to lateral hires and support staff.

7. External Links

I have mixed feelings about using external links throughout a law firm Web site. On the one hand, links -- especially a whole page of them -- may earn a bookmark that later leads to new business. On the other hand, when people click on an external link, they bid adieu to your firm's Web site. A good compromise solution consists of configuring all external links to open each respective Web site in a new browser window. Therefore, your firm's site will remain open behind the new browser window.

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Most, if not all, Web editing programs can create this type of link in a matter of seconds.

interesting story about itself, its accomplishments, and the people behind those accomplishments. This is exactly what your firm's best trial lawyers do in court -- they take a relatively boring topic and transform it into an interesting story. Good Luck!

Conclusion

Please consider the above advice as a loose set of guidelines; not as hard and fast rules. Just make sure that your firm tells an

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