

## TechnoLawyer.com: A Web Hosting Primer for Law Firms

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*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](http://www.technolawyer.com).*

*In this article, Matthew Mandell, Anne Rendall, and Gill Wagner have teamed up to discuss the basics of the Web hosting business for those law firms interested in biting the bullet and launching a Web site. Specifically, these three Web gurus define the terms every law firm needs to know, explain price points and service options, list a number of online Web hosting directories, and recommend a few of their favorite ISPs. This article won the MasterPost, a writing contest in The TechnoLawyer Community.*

### Introduction

Law firms interested in setting up a Web site must first make some technical decisions (the boring part) before focusing on content and design (the fun part). First and foremost, law firms must decide who will “host” their site. For the most part, law firms have three choices when it comes to Web hosting:

- Run the site internally on one of their own computers
- Rent Web server space from an Internet Service Provider (ISP)
- Use one of their own computers but house it at an ISP (this is called “co-location” in geek-speak).

Most law firms choose the second option for two very good reasons:

- It's the cheapest solution
- Law firms have better things to do than worry about a Web server twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Unfortunately, no option is completely hassle free. Law firms that decide to rent Web server space don't have to deal with many technical issues, but they do face a headache of a different kind — choosing an ISP. Thus far, the ISP market has not experienced much in the way of merger mania and market consolidation. As a result, thousands of ISPs exist, most of which offer a variety of Web hosting services. In this article, we will help you start down the right path by defining some key terms, discussing pricing and basic services, and pointing you to a number of online Web hosting directories. We'll also recommend a few of our favorite ISPs.

### Key Terminology

Just as most people wouldn't buy a car without knowing the meaning of terms like “miles per gallon” and “ABS brakes,” law firms shouldn't negotiate a Web hosting deal without an understanding of the terms listed below.

#### Bandwidth

This is the speed of an ISP's connection to the Internet (measured in bits per second). Any ISP worth its salt should have a T-1 connection, which boasts a top speed of 1.544 Mbps — plenty of horsepower to deliver any law firm Web site.

**Disk Storage Space:** This is the amount of hard drive space that ISPs allot to their Web hosting customers. To determine how much disk storage space your law firm will need, add up the size of every file (HTML, graphics, etc.) that will appear on the Web site and then triple it to allow for growth.

#### Data Transfer (Traffic)

This is the amount of data (measured in bytes) transferred from the ISP to visitors of your law firm's Web site. In actuality, “traffic” is just another way to measure bandwidth — when John Doe browses your law firm's home page (which probably includes both text and graphics), the total amount of data sent to him from the ISP is the data transferred. As with any scarce resource, the price of maintaining a Web site increases as its traffic increases.

#### Web Site Logs

Every Web server (the software that runs a Web site) generates a log that contains raw data, such as number of visitors, most frequently visited Web page, type of browser used, etc. Many ISPs send these logs to their customers as a courtesy. Customers who purchase Web analysis software can generate statistical reports from these logs to help them make strategic decisions about their Web site. Some ISPs will go a step further and generate these reports for their clients, thereby saving them the time and expense of doing it themselves.

#### E-Mail Redirector

Many Web hosting plans come with an e-mail redirector, which allows customers to set up a catch-all e-mail address for feedback (e.g., [webmaster@lawfirm.com](mailto:webmaster@lawfirm.com)) and redirect all mail sent to that address to a real person (e.g., [johndoe@lawfirm.com](mailto:johndoe@lawfirm.com)).

**Autoresponder:** Some Web hosting plans come with autoresponders, which go one step further than redirectors. When someone sends an e-mail message to an autoresponder address, it automatically returns a prewritten response to the sender and forwards the sender's message to another address (a real person at your law firm). If you would like to see how this works, send a message to [<autoresponder@orbtech.com>](mailto:<autoresponder@orbtech.com>). You will receive a canned response and your original message will be sent to Gill.

#### POP3 E-Mail Accounts

These are actual e-mail accounts; the kind that most people use. Many Web hosting plans come with one or more POP3 accounts. However, these POP3 accounts do not come with a dial-up service. Therefore, your law firm will need an alternative means of connecting to the Internet to retrieve the mail from these accounts.

## Pricing and Services

ISP Web hosting services range from as little as \$20/month to as much as \$1,000/month or even more. SimpleNet <<http://www.simplenet.com/>> is one ISP that offers hosting services for under \$20/month, but there is a catch — very little hand-holding or technical support. If your law firm has a resident Web expert, a low-priced plan may be a perfect fit, but most law firms will want more personal service and reliability. Therefore, expect to pay around \$75/month. Even so, this only adds up to \$900/year.

Any good Web hosting plan should offer a certain amount of disk storage space and traffic for a fixed price. It should also come with an overage feature to automatically bill your firm if it exceeds its traffic limit (instead of shutting down the Web site). Finally, the ISP should offer several different plans so that your firm can purchase only what it needs, knowing that it can upgrade in the future if necessary. At a minimum, we recommend that law firms rent at least 10 MB of disk storage space and 300MB/month of traffic (data transfer allotment).

Moving from the basic to the advanced, many ISPs provide special features designed to make Web sites more useful or interactive or both. This can range from feedback forms to streaming audio. A complete discussion of these features lies beyond the scope of article, but just remember — some of these services decrease the stability of Web servers, thereby making it

essential that your ISP provide round-the-clock maintenance and some level of redundancy.

On a final note, don't worry too much about making a mistake. The great thing about the Web hosting business (assuming your law firm has its own domain name, which we recommend) is that your firm can change from one ISP to another easily and seamlessly. As a result, your firm need not worry about being wed to a lousy ISP. This freedom of choice and transparency is what makes the ISP market so competitive. It's definitely a buyer's market!

## Finding the Perfect ISP

Clearly, the best way to find an ISP for your firm's Web site is through references from your peers. If this route doesn't pan out, try searching through one or more of the following ISP directories:

- Budget Web <<http://www.budgetweb.com>>
- The List <<http://www.thelist.com>>
- Top Hosts <<http://www.tophosts.com>>
- The Ultimate Web Host List <<http://www.webhostlist.com>>

Good luck and happy hosting!

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