



Web Sites as Branding Tools

QUICK TIPS FOR CREATING A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR PROSPECTS

BY ANNE BOTHWELL

Cruise around a dozen or more law firm Web sites and I'll bet \$5 to a ginger cake that before long the phrase "What were they thinking?" will pop into your mind. The fact is that some firms still consider their Web sites a necessary evil (as in, "Everyone has one so we must have one, too").

Unfortunately, this indifference reveals itself vividly on screen, quite unpleasantly in some cases. Scarier still is that the same lawyers who say their business comes from referrals so they don't need any of this marketing stuff are often the ones with the least-appealing Web sites. What *are* they thinking?

So consider this. The typical general counsel, and I have interviewed hundreds of them, tells me that she finds a lawyer or law firm through her network of referral sources, typically get-

ting two or three names. She then visits the respective Web sites to compare lawyers and firms. In an instant a visual evaluation is made—in less than three seconds. If the general counsel is an average 21st century person, she is subjected daily to good design in magazines, on television and on the Internet. She may not know exactly what makes it good, but she probably recognizes it when she sees it. And what opinions will she form about the firm whose site is disorganized, poorly structured, sprinkled with missing links and generally unappealing? Will she want to do business with that firm? Likely not.

So how could a firm turn this situation around?

Opportunity Knocks

A law firm's Web site can provide its best opportunity to build positive associations with a large audience through visual appeal, rich content and intui-

tive navigation. In other words, your Web site is an opportunity to brand yourself. The world's most trusted brands create positive associations in our minds so that we're more likely to use their products and services.

The words that tell the online world about a firm's services are important. But visual appeal and ease of use are critical too, especially when one considers the fungible text that too often awaits unsuspecting visitors as they explore law firm Web sites. This is not meant to be unkind, but ... compare six general practice law firms, six real estate firms, six employment firms and so on, and consider if whether switching the firm names around would even be noticeable? What message is being sent to these potential clients—"We don't care enough about you to make a visit to our Web site a positive and interesting experience"?

Even law firms that regularly update the content on their sites and do things like optimizing their keywords to increase their search engine hits often miss the mark when it comes to creating a positive experience for prospective clients.

So what do potential clients want from your site? The list could go on and on, but so you can get headed in the right direction immediately, here are the top four items they consistently mention.

Intuitive Navigational Design

It should be easy for site visitors to get to where they want to go—and get back to where they started from with one click. If it's hard for visitors to find their way around, or if internal links on the site don't work rapidly and logically, people may get testy. Testy is *not* a frame of mind conducive to building a client relationship.

Think of visiting a Web site as akin to renting a car. Every car looks different on the outside, but inside they all have an accelerator, brake and steering wheel in the same place. If something isn't in the right place, or doesn't open the way it should, it grates on the nerves. How irritating is it to stand in an airport lot in the pouring rain trying to figure out how to open the trunk of your aqua blue Chevrolet Aveo rental? A good Web site helps its users get quickly oriented.

Simple Visuals

Creative graphics can be impressive, but if a site takes more than a few seconds to load, frustrated surfers are likely to give up and move on to another—faster—site. When it comes to flash and other animation, just because you can have it does not mean you should. The majority of clients don't like things moving around the home page. They find it distracting, bothersome and sometimes creepy!

A law firm Web site is not a video game. It is an informational resource. A little animation or flash is okay. None is even better.

The Story on What You Do

Generic text describing practice areas is acceptable and expected. However, examples of actual matters are infinitely more persuasive. Potential clients want the answer to this question: "What have you done for a company just like ours, for a business in our industry with this same type of issue?" Or put differently, "What is the membership of this club I might be joining?"

Whether you use actual client names and details, or generally described but unnamed client case summaries, including representative matters on your site is usually the best way to tell

your story. Potential clients can then begin to see a fit and understand who they will be rubbing shoulders with.

Easy-to-Find Contact Information

This last one should be so obvious that it's hard to believe it needs repeating—but it does. Do not make people search for contact information on your Web site. It is one of the top three reasons people visit professional services sites. So make it visible within the top layers of your site. A "contact us" link on the home page has become industry standard in the same way that photos and e-mail addresses are expected on lawyers' bios.

Also, a link providing MapQuest directions to your office is a must for the client who wants to quickly find and print them before heading to see you. It's easy to put a MapQuest add-on link on your site, which allows visitors to get point-to-point directions without actually leaving your firm's pages.

There are many new and interesting ways to connect with clients, referral sources and prospects online—blogs, social networks and RSS feeds are all becoming more familiar tools in law firm marketing. However, the majority of the profession has yet to embrace these tools, and for most law firms their Web site is—and will remain—their number one online branding tool, communicating their message to the market every day. You would do well to consider what kind of message your site is currently communicating—and how you can improve it. **LP**

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