The future of law firm Internet marketing

BY HANK BRIGMAN

Top 10 Web Site Strategies for Building Your Law Firm

In producing our legal Industry Touchpoint Report, “Best Practices in Legal Marketing: Effective Use of Web Sites,” we analyzed the Web sites of 30 leading law firms (from Jones Day with 1,850 attorneys to Buck & Gordon with 14 attorneys) to see how they meet the needs of their prospects and clients. We were curious what the marketing executives from the 30 leading law firms participating in our study would seek to add to their Web sites in their next redesign, so we asked.

As the leaders in the law industry, their answers effectively revealed the future of how law firms will use Web sites to market their services and acquire and retain their clientele. Our findings are instructive for those law firm marketers who wish to capitalize on these opportunities.

Database Driven Solutions Will Save Time and Money

Behind the scenes, technology and functionality will drive much of the change as marketers seek database driven solutions that enable their intranet, firm Web site, and extranets to work together, and to be easily managed by in-house staff. With a database backend, text changes that historically had to be made on multiple pages can be done in moments instead of hours.

Extranets Will Improve Communication and Increase Client Retention

Many spoke of features and technology that would improve communication between law firm and client. Extranets were popular with those who didn’t already provide this service. Fifteen of the 17 firms (88%) that did not offer extranets seek to add this service. Providing paralegal and administrative staff contact information and the ability to communicate from the Web site with the firm were also mentioned as methods of improving communication.

Multi-Lingual Web Sites Will Aid International Efforts

Two marketing executives with firms that offer international practices will move to provide Web sites in different languages, enabling their Web sites to be understood by their international clientele and prospects.

Top 10 Web Site Strategies

1. Database Driven Solutions Will Save Time and Money
2. Extranets Will Improve Communication and Increase Client Retention
3. Multi-Lingual Web Sites Will Aid International Efforts
4. Audio and Video Will Enhance Interactivity, Marketing Effectiveness
5. Event Registration Capabilities Will Streamline Marketing and Operations
6. Expansion of Specialty Sites Hits Snag
7. Content Will Still be King
8. Search Engine Optimization Will Create Competitive Advantages
9. Your Web Site as a Pipeline Generator
10. Improving Communications Driving Web Site Redesign

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Then surf to http://ernieattorney.typepad.com, and suddenly he’s “Ernie the Attorney.” Now you know Svenson has hobbies — technology and music, to name just a couple — and even a sense of humor.

Svenson, a partner with Gordon, Arata, McCollam, Duplantis & Eagan LLP, is just one of a growing number of members of the legal profession who have launched a “Web log” or “blog,” as they are nicknamed. Closer to home, Milwaukee lawyers Frank Pasternak and Jeff Beard, as well as University of Wisconsin Law School Professor D. Gordon Smith, also maintain “blawgs” — law-related Web logs.

A blog is essentially a Web site that’s organized by time and updated frequently. It can also be thought of as an online diary, which of course means that unlike the traditional diary, it can be read by anyone with Internet access.

Legal marketing consultant and attorney Larry Bodine, of Glen Elyn, Ill., characterizes blogs as “the hottest thing to come along in marketing since the telephone.” Bodine writes that there are hundreds of law-related blogs of the estimated 600,000 blogs online. “The beauty of blogs is that they allow any business person, including lawyers in big and small firms alike, to market themselves directly to clients and prospects,” he observes.

Better yet, they are cheap and easy to do.

**But First, Why Blog?**

Svenson says it was “serendipity” that got him started blogging. He’s always been fascinated by technology and law, which led him to meet other lawyers with the same interest. One of them introduced him to blogging about a year and a half ago. Svenson had always wanted his own Web site but was a little intimidated by what he perceived as the time and highly technical expertise needed to do so. Blogging struck him as a way to bypass both barriers.

“It’s like having a discussion out in the open about anything that matters to you,” he says. “My real goal is just to participate in something that I think is clearly changing the world we live in. The Internet, e-mail, and people posting...
to Web logs — we have only glimpsed at where this is all going. It’s about people communicat-
ing in a radically different way. The idea that people from Australia, Japan and Ireland have read my site and we’re conversing in public just blows my mind."

As for Pasternak, of Frank Pasternak & Associates S.C., he launched his blawg, "Wisconsin Personal Injury Lawyers Blog," last November after coming across other blawgs when doing legal research. He saw it primarily as a way to educate the public; at http://wisconsinpersonalinjurylawyers.blogspot.com, he voices his opposition to tort reform and talks about unsafe products, among other related top-
ics. It’s a very different forum from his law firm’s Web site, where his firm is showcased. In
contrast, Pasternak’s blog is his "soapbox."

"The nice thing about blawgs is, it’s an inex-
pensive way to get your name out there and share what you know with the public," he says.

blogspot.com just last spring, after the last final exam was graded. He teaches business law
courses, if you couldn’t guess by his blawg’s name.

"I saw other law professors doing it and was curious, so I spent a little time reading their
blawgs. I soon learned that they can be great information hubs for particular areas of law. I
decided I wanted to start disseminating my own ideas and see what kind of response I’d get. I
think that’s the real reason to blog — to exchange information and build a community," he
explains.

Although his blawg is still in its infancy, he has already received a great deal of constructive feedback. In fact, one of the best aspects of blogging for academics is the immediacy of feedback. Law professors used to hatch theories, do research, write an article, get it pub-
lished and receive feedback months or years after an idea was born. Now they can float an
idea beyond the wow stage for audio, video, and the use of flash, expect to see these technologies in use to improve lawyer bios, seminars and events, and general marketing and branding.

Event Registration Capabilities Will Streamline Marketing and Operations
Seven marketing executives specifically men-
tioned improving their event and seminar sec-
tions in their next redesign. Expect technological upgrades to dramatically benefit these sections as they move beyond information to include event registration with auto response, credit card acceptance, and even streaming video of past seminars.

Expansion of Specialty Sites Hits Snag
Specialty sites continue to be a push for those
on the cutting-edge. These are sites that focus exclusively on a single practice area or matter, and stand-alone from the firm’s primary site. Those who offer these types of sites seek to expand their specialty site offerings, while others are exploring this strategy for potential imple-
mentation.

However, a word of caution regarding the
deployment of specialty sites. In a recent discus-
sion with Shari Thrunow, renowned search engine optimization (SEO) expert and author of "Search Engine Visibility," she warned that search engines are starting to view some specialty sites as Spam, and excluding them from search
results. I would encourage any firm practicing or contemplating specialty sites to thoroughly
understand the nuances of this topic prior to committing dollars to this strategy.

Content Will Still be King
Understanding the importance of helping visi-
tors find the information they seek, several mar-
keting executives will enhance navigation and their Web sites’ search function and capabilities in the next redesign. With this in mind, look for law firm Web sites to serve as the content reposi-
tories. As users hit the Internet looking for infor-
mation, law firms will meet this need with
Complimenting this move will be the expa-
sion of onsite newsletter and update registration. However, look for firm delivered content to be offered by narrowly defined topics based on sub-
scribers’ interests. Additionally, visitors will find
law firms ready to more prominently tout their successes on their Web sites through case study and testimonial content.

Search Engine Optimization Will Create Competitive Advantages
As we discuss in "Best Practices in Legal Marketing: Effective Use of Web Sites," SEO
represents an opportunity to create competitive advantages as few in the legal space are excelling at this important component of maximizing Web site effectiveness. In our interviews, only one marketing executive mentioned the desire to improve their SEO.

Your Web Site as a Pipeline Generator
Only one marketing executive specifically men-
tioned enhancing the new business development potential of their site, referring to a desire to have their site serve as a "pipeline generator."

Our research supports the fact that Web sites can, and do, generate prospects and clients. Twenty-two (73%) of firms in our study generated new clients in the previous 12 months whose "first awareness" of their firm was their Web site. Seventeen firms were able to quantify their Web site generated new clients, averaging over nine new clients annually.

Improving Communications
Driving Web Site Redesign
Interestingly, look and feel was mentioned
only twice, and appears not to be driving Web
site redesign for the bulk of these marketing executives. To these marketers, it is all about
improving communication with their clients and providing a Web site that better meets the needs of those who visit. In conclusion, look for law firm Web sites to continue to improve marketing, branding, sales, and client service efforts through the use of specialized content, and utilization of

Hank Brigman is president and CEO
of Touchpoint Metrics, the research and advisory
firm that pioneered Touchpoint Mapping™.
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Use of Web Sites" can be purchased at
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ging at the American Bar Association’s Techshow last spring, and decided a blawg would be the perfect vehicle for him. On Sept. 7, he launched
Beard says, “What I like about blogs is the built-in content manage-
ment system. You can categorize your posts. And I can add content to it from just about anywhere with an Internet connection and a browser, and it just takes a couple of minutes. That’s something you can’t do with most Web sites, because you have to have the design tools on the system that you’re using to update the Web site.” (He notes that some blogging software, such as Radio Userland, does not offer that mobility because the software must be installed on your hard drive.)

WHAT ABOUT MARKETING?

Clearly, blogs can have a wide reach. Venturpreneur has received over 2,000 visitors in just a few months — and that’s without promoting it in any way, Smith says. Beard did promote his blawg some-
what, announcing it on list serves, etc., and in less than two weeks, it quickly ascended the Google page rankings. Google, probably the most popular search engine, uses a “human intelligence model” in its page rank-
ing, he explains, so that the more people that link to your site, the high-
er it falls in the ranking. “Google favors blogs because bloggers are by nature information-sharing people, and they love to cross-link to each other. You won’t move up the Google rankings nearly as quickly with a Web site.”

For his part, clients have found Svenson via his blawg, and he’s thrilled about that, but he views it as a soft-sell marketing device. “I think we’re hitting a new period where hav-
ing these clinical, antiseptic Web sites is going to become more and more difficult.”

Svenson uses the blogging experience for readers to link to others. “I’ve linked to sources. No knowledge of HTML is required, but Svenson says the ability to hyperlink is essential, because part of the blogging experience for readers is linking to sources.

Pasternak uses Blogspot and recom-

BLOGGING BASICS

New bloggers do not need to pos-
sess advanced technical abilities to succeed.

According to Bodine — also posts a legal marketing blawg at
http://www.larrybodine.com/blog — the simplest way to start and maintain a blog is to go to Blogspot at

Still think you can’t do it? It’s so easy that Smith says his 12-year-old son was able to start a family blog with Blogspot on his own recently for a Boy Scout project.

The software costs around $40. Their hosting is free, because it is advertiser-supported.

If you want to increase traffic to your blawg, you must provide something unique. “Ernie the Attorney” in memory of a great lawyer; “One Hell” and “Unbillable Hours” and “Excited Utterances,” by practitioners. Consider putting an RSS newsfeed on your blawg. “A lot of new blog-
gers miss out on this, and they’re missing something big,” says Beard. RSS stands for “really simple syndication” or “really simple stylesheet,” and is a way to deliver news and information to your readers. It allows other Web sites and newsreaders to pull in your content and syndicate it to another site or program. Beard posts two news aggrega-
tors for the legal world, http://www.dailywhirl.com and http://my.detod.com. Click on them, and you’ll see the headlines from many blawgs on one page. It’s a built-in feature for Moveable Type and Radio, Beard notes.

Link to Svenson’s blawg. He’s known as the “blawg whisperer” for the list he maintains at his site of all blawgs.

Beard says, “There’s nothing wrong with injecting a sense of humor into your blawg, but you don’t want to lose the professional edge.”

Blogs have the design tools on the system and it just takes a couple of minutes. “It’s one thing to read a news story and think about it; it’s quite another to put your thoughts into words and feel comfortable putting them out there, he explains. Also, it’s hard for him to say that all that time went into the blog, because some of it involved tasks he would’ve done anyway — reading a decision or article.

The time it takes to actually post content is minimal. Beard estimates it takes 20-30 minutes, tops.

TIPS FROM THE PROS

Skip the strategy. Svenson says that blogs are for those who are able to improve. “It’s foolish to have a strate-
gy. Blogging was invented yesterday.” You have to be able to go with the flow, but a little strategy is OK, Beard says. The best blogs have a “theme” or an area on specialization of some sort, and you should decide before launching what your theme will be, and what your “signal-to-noise ratio” will be — how much of your content will be focused on the theme, and how much will be unrelated personal information.

Blogging was invented yesterday.”

No one will come back to a blog that’s updated once every three weeks, Svenson says. Especially in the start-up phase, when you’re building a readership, try to update daily if possible, advises Beard.

Don’t censor yourself too much. Don’t worry about blawg politics are taboo, says Svenson. “Ernie the Attorney” in memory of a great lawyer; “One Hell” and “Unbillable Hours” and “Excited Utterances,” by practitioners. Consider putting an RSS newsfeed on your blawg. “A lot of new blog-
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