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The future of law firm Internet marketing

BY HANK BRIGMAN

TOP 10

Strategies for
BUILDING YOUR LAW FIRM

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Top Ten 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.

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QUARTERLY • FALL 2003

'BLOGS'

BY JANE PRIBEK

Hot new tool FOR INTERNET MARKETING

Looking at his firm's Web site, you'd think New Orleans lawyer Ernest E. Svenson is just another commercial litigator. Accomplished to be sure. But there's no clue as to what he's like as a person.

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 has 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

websites

http://ernieattorney.typepad.com   http://venturpreneur.blogspot.com   www.lawtechguru.com

to Web logs — we have only glimpsed at where this is all going. It's about people communicating 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 topics. 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 inexpensive way to get your name out there and share what you know with the public," he says.

Meanwhile, Smith launched his blawg, "Venturpreneur," at http://venturpreneur. 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 published and receive feedback months or years after an idea was born. Now they can float a thought and within days know if it's worth pursuing.

Finally, the newcomer to blogging, Beard, of Quarles & Brady LLP, is oddly enough, probably the most technologically savvy of the group that talked to *Wisconsin Law Journal*, serving as his firm's in-house legal technology specialist.

Like Svenson, he'd always wanted his own Web site, but wanted to do it right. "In my opinion, having a moldy Web site is worse than not having one at all — especially for someone who's talking about technology issues," he says.

Then he attended a few presentations on blog-

TOP 10 Strategies for BUILDING YOUR LAW FIRM

Audio and Video Will Enhance Interactivity, Marketing Effectiveness

In the coming years, look for leading law firms to creatively add audio and video in a manner that enhances and improves interactivity and their Web sites' marketing communications. To date, the primary use of audio and video has been to generate a "wow." As firms move 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 mentioned improving their event and seminar sections 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 implementation.

However, a word of caution regarding the deployment of specialty sites. In a recent discussion with Shari Thurow, 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 visitors find the information they seek, several marketing 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 repositories. As users hit the Internet looking for information, law firms will meet this need with expanded content that can be quickly and easily accessed.

Complimenting this move will be the expansion of onsite newsletter and update registration. However, look for firm delivered content to be offered by narrowly defined topics based on subscribers' 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 mentioned 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 technologies and techniques that make this content more accessible to their target market.

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 http://www.lawtechguru.com.

Beard says, "What I like about blogs is the built-in content management 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 somewhat, 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 rankings, he explains, so that the more people that link to your site, the higher 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," he observes.

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 having these clinical, antiseptic Web sites that reveal very little about yourself — just 'Rah, rah, I'm a great lawyer' — don't work. I'd rather work with thoughtful, interesting people. If my blawg conveys that about me, that's what I'm interested in. And I've found some great people though my blawg; that part has been a raging success."

Likewise, Pasternak reports his blawg has been a great networking vehicle for him. He's received e-mails and calls from personal injury lawyers across the country who learned of him via his blawg.

Smith warns, however, that blogging can be a time-consuming enterprise, and it is a pretty indirect method of reaching potential customers. Lawyers complain often about their stressful schedules. Add blogging to an already stressed life, and you are not going to like the results, he predicts.

Moreover, he sees blogging as a fairly effective marketing tool for personalities — "But most lawyers are not selling their personalities. Quite the opposite, in fact, they are often selling their ability to assume a client's personality, or at least embrace a client's cause. In that context, blogging sends the wrong message."

BLOGGING BASICS

New bloggers do not need to possess 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 www.blogspot.com or Radio Userland at http://radio.userland.com. Download their free trial software, follow the directions, type in your message, click and it's posted.

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.

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 recommends it. Sure, there's advertising on his blawg, and the download can be slow for those with dial-up connections — "but you get what you pay for." He says he never paid a dime for his blawg.

Another option, which Smith, Beard and Svenson recommend, is the Moveable Type platform at http://www.movabletype.org , or its cousin, Type Pad, at http://www.type-pad.com — both also very affordable.

The neat thing about Type Pad, according to Beard, is that you don't have to look for a host, and they provide three levels of service, all of which are cheap.

As for the time involved, that can be significant at first, but as you become more comfortable with blogging, it decreases.

Smith devoted about two hours per day this past summer finding his "blogging voice." 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 blogging is for those who are able to improvise. "It's foolish to have a strategy. 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 your blog 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.

Blog regularly. 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. Svenson says that no one will visit your blawg if it reads like a press release.

Of course blogging is a little bit about self-promotion, but too much of that will turn readers away fast. "Institutional" or purely marketing blogs suffer from that. "The interesting blogs, the ones people read, are a little bit edgy. They're put out there by knowledgeable writers who have good insights," Smith advises.

Beard agrees. You can't aim it toward the most conservative possible audience because that audience probably isn't reading blogs.

Then again, be careful about what you post. Client information or law firm politics are taboo, says Svenson. If you are discussing cases, don't talk about those that haven't been filed, Pasternak adds.

Likewise, law professors would be foolish to post information about faculty power struggles. Highly personal information should also be approached with caution. And consider a disclaimer of some sort.

Smith says, "The best blogs have a point of view. An attitude. Many lawyers are rightly skeptical of taking firm public positions, not only because they may drive away potential clients, but because they find those positions used against them in litigation or negotiations."

Keep professional obligations in mind. Pasternak likens posting reliable, interesting content on a blawg to performing pro bono service — lawyers have an obligation to serve the public, and giving them useful information is one way to accomplish that.

Don't limit yourself just to law. There's nothing wrong with injecting a sense of humor into your blawg, says Beard. He calls it "edutainment." After all, blawgs aren't law reviews.

Svenson posts a "wishlist" — his picks from Amazon.com, if you're buying. He didn't come up with the idea; he saw other bloggers doing it and at first thought it was vain. But he decided that the lists are another valuable window to the blogger's personality. The list has made his birthday and holidays easier on his friends and family, he adds.

Come up with a creative title and tagline. Svenson dubbed his blog "Ernie the Attorney" in memory of a magistrate judge and mentor who gave him that nickname right out of law school. He's convinced that it's a catchy and easy-to-remember title, which has probably led to more hits than he would've otherwise had. As for his tagline, Svenson is "Searching for truth & justice (in an unjust world)."

Other clever blawg names include "How Appealing," maintained by an appellate lawyer; "One Hell" and "Unlearned Hand" — both law student sites; and "Unbillable Hours" and "Excited Utterances," by practitioners.

Consider putting an RSS newsfeed on your blawg. "A lot of new bloggers miss out on this, and they're missing something big," says Beard. RSS stands for "rich site summary" or "really simple syndication," and it is a way to extend your blawg's reach. It allows other Web sites and newsreaders to pull in your links and content to another Web site or program. Beard posts two news aggregators 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 among bloggers for the list he maintains at his site of all blawgs. He's happy to welcome more to the fold, and help promote your blawg.