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A 'Window on the World' and the World's 'Window on Us'

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Editor's note: First in an occasional series.

It's no great revelation that the Web site has become one of the main marketing tools for law firms and the go-to source of law firm information for many clients, but while a vast majority of firms have some sort of Web presence, not all of them know how to make the most of it.

This can be especially true for midsized and smaller firms, where Web sites are typically produced and maintained on a budget, often in-house.

"A good Web site is imperative," said consultant Stacy West Clark. "So many small to midsized firms today have old Web sites and inferior Web sites, which are a true disservice to them. The best Web sites are kept fresh with great information and deliver value to a visitor — which means a reason to stay on the site."

Among some of the most common Web site gaffes committed by smaller firms are "old photography and dated graphics," according to Clark.

"It's amazing how many firms are resistant right now to spending money to improve their Web presence," she said.

A professional-looking Web site can run a firm anywhere from "\$5,000 to \$25,000, depending on the amount of bells and whistles," she said, but added that "fortunately, that's a cost they don't have to bear more than one time every five to seven years."

Clark did say firms would likely have to spend more money, more often than that if they're serious about search engine optimization — making their sites easier to find on the Web and thus increasing traffic.

"I think a small firm can get a tremendous Web site for about \$10,000, if they hire a terrific Web site builder who puts the right information in for the search engines to find and works with a photographer who has an art direction background," Clark said, adding that a Web site's photography is very important "because it's the first thing the eye goes to."

Clark advised against cliches like black-and-white headshots and stock photos of courthouse steps, instead encouraging firms to stage realistic shots of their attorneys either in an office setting or in locations that illustrate the types of clients they represent.

Micah Buchdahl, president of law marketing consulting company HTMLawyers Inc. and chairman of the American Bar Association's law practice management section, agreed with Clark that sophisticated search engine optimization will increase overall costs and said \$10,000 is enough for a "really good" site, but the highest end Web presence will run firms "more like \$35,000 to \$50,000."

Buchdahl said that, while not every midsized and small law firm has a Web site that could be considered up to snuff, there are still plenty that are getting it right.

He said it's becoming "harder and harder to differentiate" between many midsized and large firm Web sites in terms of

quality.

"Many of the sites out there now cost about one-fourth of what they cost five years ago, which has basically allowed a lot of midsized firms to have a Web presence that's extremely similar, if not identical, to a large firm site," he said, adding that there's "absolutely no excuse not to have a viable presence online."

Setting Goals

Beyond staples like attorney bios and practice area descriptions, which can be found on even the shoddiest of law firm Web sites, midsized and small firms across Pennsylvania have taken many different approaches to the looks, contents and overall objectives of their sites.

Paul F. Prestia, CEO of Valley Forge, Pa.-based intellectual property firm Ratner Prestia, called the Internet his firm's "primary window on the world and the world's primary window on us" and his firm's Web site "the most common communicator with clients on matters not directly related to something you're actually working on."

Ratner Prestia's site, which is maintained by the firm's public relations administrator, includes a section titled "IP Library," which Prestia said "consists primarily of all of the articles and publications we do in one place."

Clicking on the link gives visitors access to newsletters and newspaper articles written by attorneys at the firm, as well as downloadable CLE presentations and seminars, case law updates and an informational section about IP.

Prestia said he believes his firm's Web site primarily serves as a source of information for both existing and prospective clients looking for background on the firm.

"I don't look at it so much as a source of contacts you wouldn't otherwise have, but rather a resource for people who know you to learn more about you," he said.

Buchdahl said that when he's helping a firm design its Web site, he takes a different approach depending on whether the firm's primary goal is to generate business directly from the Web or simply to have a corporate identity on the Internet that new and existing clients can refer to.

For firms hoping to drum up new business through their Web site, Buchdahl said he focuses on search engine optimization in order to make the site easier for potential clients to come across when looking for a firm with a certain expertise.

For those firms seeking to establish a corporate identity on the Web, Buchdahl focuses mainly on content and image.

Clark said this type of Web site serves as a "confirmation of a binding decision" and a "validation of a buying choice" for clients who have recently hired a firm.

William Pietragallo II, founding partner of Pittsburgh-based general practice firm Pietragallo Gordon Alfano Bosick & Raspanti, said he feels his firm's Web site serves a similar purpose for lateral hires and new attorneys as well.

"We're always looking for talented people to join our firm and in that process they're also doing the due diligence," he said. The Web site "is one more way for us to communicate with a segment of the legal community we're interested in talking to."

According to Pietragallo, his firm has a three-tier system for keeping the Web site updated, beginning with the firm's business development department, followed by firm partners Marc S. Raspanti and Mark Gordon in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, respectively, and finally "the practice group heads and individual lawyers themselves, who are requested frequently to look at and appropriately revise their individual profiles."

Knowing Your audience

While most firms have their clients in mind as the target demographic when designing their Web sites, Lancaster, Pa.-based general practice firm Hartman Underhill & Brubaker has geared the content on its site toward lawyers, particularly those in other jurisdictions looking to refer work, according to managing partner Alexander Henderson III.

"We really haven't seen over the years a lot of clients selecting us through Internet advertising, whereas lawyers, I think, have the knowledge to look at our Web site and say, 'This is the firm that I need,'" he said. "We like to think of ourselves as a lawyer's law firm."

Hartman Underhill's Web site includes a section that explains its fee policy, as well as the way the firm conducts its client-attorney relationships.

"My view is we all have an ethical duty to convey to our clients as clearly as we can what our fee policies are," Henderson said. "We don't put hourly rates on there because they change and vary, but other details are readily accessible, not just in the initial letter the person gets when they first hire us."

Henderson said the Web site's "Fee Policy" section also dovetails with the concept of keeping the site's information lawyer-friendly.

"They can look at that and understand the ways we're billing," he said.

Another deliberate aspect of the firm's Web site, Henderson said, is its simple layout, in which every page prominently features the firm's contact information.

"A lot of sites have a lot of pictures and rotating numbers, but I find it annoying when I'm looking for a phone number or an address and I can't find it," he said. "Glitz takes up bandwidth and it takes time to load. We want people to get on the site, find a lawyer in a particular expertise and call them up."

'Content is King'

Regardless of how flashy a firm's Web site is, Buchdahl said, "the most important part is to make sure the message is there."

Alan M. Nochumson, head of the three-attorney Philadelphia-based firm Nochumson P.C., said "a Web site is more like a business card nowadays."

"People I meet, I presume they're going to look at my Web site and if it's not professional and up-to-date and extensive, they look at those things to decide whether they're going to use my law firm or someone else," he said.

Nochumson said he and the other attorneys at his firm provide the content for the site but that an outside marketing and Web development company handles the technical aspects of updating the site.

Nochumson said he looks at his firm's Web site, which features articles, newsletters and podcasts by Nochumson P.C. attorneys, as a means to demonstrate professional expertise to potential clients.

"We get a lot of referral business and I think people [who look at our Web site] have confidence that we know the law," he said. "[Our site's content] is not just fluff like, 'Oh, we're going to do a good job.' We state what we know and explain how we know it."

Philadelphia solo practitioner Harper J. Dimmerman, whose practice focuses on litigation and real estate law, said he looks at his Web site as just one of many resources for potential clients to learn more about him.

"I don't have the expectation that people are going to see my Web site and think, 'I have to hire him,'" he said. "But I think I'm going to at least get them thinking a little bit."

From there, he said, he "fully expects" potential clients to go seek out more background on him through other sources.

With that in mind, Dimmerman said he strives to make a good first impression with his Web site and adheres to the credo that "content is king."

Dimmerman said he taught himself how to update his site, rather than spend time and money outsourcing the task to a Web developer.

"I've always focused on doing things myself, knowing that [the site is] never going to be the way I really wanted it to look, but at least I'll have control of the content, which I think is more important than aesthetics," he said. •