

Why Most Law Firm Websites Don't Work --- And How to Improve

Them

By Lomit Patel

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Lomit Patel
lpatel@imgurus.com

Integrated Marketing Gurus <http://www.imgurus.com>

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” This maxim is true for many things in life, none more so than a website. While most law firms are professional in their day-to-day business operations, many still haven't learned that a website that's poorly designed can damage the firm's credibility and impair its image. To enhance the firm's image and strengthen its credibility, it's important to field a website that's professionally designed. Most prospective clients who see a badly designed website wind up taking their business to a competitor whose website strengthens that firm's image of professionalism.

The Internet is fertile ground for law firms. According to Martindale and other “find-a-lawyer” sites, thousands of people use the Internet to search for a lawyer. The findings from the study in Minnesota Law & Politics are as true today as they were when the study was first published in February 2001: “a well designed and easy-to-use website can be invaluable for firms trying to connect with potential clients.” In a misguided attempt to save time and money, many smaller law firms use a generic template to create their website. The decision to use a solution that's easy but inferior can impair the firm's ability to attract potential clients via the Internet.

There are solutions for firms that want to limit their costs while mounting a site that reflects positively on the firm's professional capabilities. In fact, the quality of a website can be assessed using the following four criteria:

Design - What's the overall look and feel of the site, not simply the graphics? How would you assess the splash page, the home page, the internal pages and the specialty sites? Some of the most effective designs contain only the simplest graphics yet are effective in their layout, their structure, and their download time.

Content - How does the website reflect the quality, quantity and availability of the firm's knowledge? How detailed are the attorneys' biographies? The practice area descriptions? Publications? Does the site offer unique informational materials? It's fascinating to see the depth of resources on some sites...and the sketchy brochure-ware on others.

Usability - What use is a site if it's difficult to use? Usability includes a variety of components. First is how to find the data you're seeking, which starts with consistent navigation. Is there a site map? Are there several levels of searching and search results? Is the content logically related? Is it easy

to read? Easy to print? What's the set-up and operation of the database for attorney biographies or publications? Usability depends on which end-users you expect your site to serve, including clients, prospects, referring attorneys, corporate counsel, law students, lateral hires, members of the media, business owners, and consumers. Some sites make it clear that they're only for recruiting; others are targeted at consumers. Most law-firm websites need a presence that's useful to all these stakeholders.

Interactivity - If your site has several e-mail links, you need to keep these points in mind. Some good on-line forms are helpful. In fact, what separates a website from a print piece is some interactive components. This interactivity, in fact, is one of the major advantages of the web. You should be able to customize the site for your needs and include on-line forms for subscriptions, contacts, seminar registrations, purchasing services and more. Other options include bulletin boards, listservs, quizzes, puzzles and demonstrations. Whenever the site interacts with the end-user -- for learning, for trading information or simply to entertain -- you're taking full advantage of this interactive medium.

Once the site is up and functioning efficiently, it's still not done. The next factor to consider is maintenance. Your site must be updated continually and refreshed with new content so it serves as a window on your process for prospective clients. Keep in mind, too, that websites that publish original articles score far higher in viewership.

Another important issue: Is there an online marketing strategy behind your firm's website? The Internet is the fastest growing marketing channel, and the days of relying on the phone directory are numbered, even though word-of-mouth and referrals continue to be the Number One marketing method for generating new clients and leads. Law firms need to be adept at using the Internet to capture leads and turn them into new clients. They can accomplish this by using search engine optimization, getting listed in online industry directories and using a newsletter to build relationships and do e-mail marketing.

The interactivity inherent in a website enables two-way communications in ways that traditional marketing materials can't. That's why a professionally designed website offers far greater value than traditional marketing materials. For that reason, a professional design for your site represents a sound investment for any law firm, no matter what its size.

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Lomit Patel is the President of Integrated Marketing Gurus. IMG is a consulting firm that provides Internet business solutions through website design, strategy and online marketing with proven results. For more information, go to <http://www.imgurus.com> . Lomit can be reached at <mailto:lpatel@imgurus.com>.

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