

THE TOP 9

INGREDIENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

Transform your firm's site from a static source of information into a vital marketing and branding tool.



BY ERIN BRERETON

Commercial litigation firm Wick Phillips Gould & Martin's website was about six years old when the firm decided it was time for a redesign. Partner Bryan Wick felt that the Texas-based, 17-attorney firm had matured during that time period – and that it needed a more sophisticated, professional-looking online presence. "The website is the first impression that you give to most clients," Wick said. "In today's day and age, most folks – right after or right before they contact you – look at your website."

Wick Phillips spent roughly six months redesigning its site, (www.wickphillips.com), to present the firm as a key player in the business litigation space, highlighting awards and adding bylined articles and frequently updated news about the company. The additional content has helped the firm strengthen its brand by identifying itself as an industry leader – and, Wick found, has become a way for potential clients to learn a significant amount about the firm before they ever meet a firm representative to discuss work.





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"A website is absolutely the most important piece of marketing collateral that a large law firm can have," said Christopher Kraft, Senior Director, Product Management at legal website development and design company Hubbard One. "When a general counsel is considering a firm, the first thing they do is go to the website to check out the lawyer, his/her experience and the firm's capabilities." The site's look and feel can have a huge impact. "Many general counsel say that they do not seriously consider a firm if the firm's website is unimpressive or unhelpful," Kraft said. "A chief counsel recently told us, 'Candidly, a bad law firm website would be like showing up to a meeting in a crumpled suit.'"

Building a better site requires careful planning and execution. Depending on your firm's marketing and branding goals, you may need to include certain key components on your site – or may want to forgo others because of cost or maintenance issues. Having a clear vision of what you want your site to achieve for your firm is crucial, and the following nine suggestions will help get you there – to create a truly stellar firm website.

1. ESTABLISH FIRM MEMBERS AS INDUSTRY EXPERTS.

One of Wick Phillips' major redesign goals was to create a site that stressed the firm's extensive legal knowledge and experience – so the firm added a section featuring articles where firm attorneys had commented on relevant case and other news and firm press releases. "Looking at other sites, we thought that was impressive to establish that firm [members] truly are content experts," Wick said. "The reality or perception is if that if you are authoring articles or are quoted in articles, you're a content expert." Wick suggests firms consider adding links to articles that firm members are quoted in or have authored, books attorneys have authored and published opinions where the firm took the lead at the district or appellate court level.

At Pryor Cashman, a 125-attorney firm with offices in New York and Los Angeles, firm-related news is added daily to its website (www.pryorcashman.com), which was redesigned in 2007. "You have to give people a reason to go to your site," said Marketing Director Elizabeth Wall. According to Wall, the firm felt news content might encourage clients to linger longer on the site. "Clients generally go to a site looking for contact information for one of our attorneys," she said. "But if we can get them to read for five seconds about the no-fault divorce act or that one of our attorneys was quoted in *Computerworld Daily* [we're hoping they'll say], 'Let me see what this is about.'"

"Content is king," Kraft said. "Studies we have conducted with general counsel indicate that their number one desire when visiting a firm's website is timely, valuable information that they can use to evaluate a legal issue and a given firm's ability to handle a matter."

2. CONSIDER SOCIAL NETWORKING BENEFITS.

"The impact of social media on local firm marketing is still being played out," said Mark Jacobsen, Senior Director, Product Development at law firm Internet marketing solutions provider FindLaw. "We recommend that firms should be participating in social media for a simple reason: It's where many of your prospective clients are." Those potential clients may be looking for counsel who have expressed specific opinions about legal matters on sites like Facebook and Twitter. "A social media presence is an extension of the brand, and it's really [about a firm] trying to understand its audience," said Alex Romanovich, Founder and Managing Partner of social media marketing consulting company Social2B.

Adding a Facebook or Twitter presence is fairly simple to do. Jacobsen suggests reaching out and connecting with people whom you find



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interesting – bar associations, other professionals, experts in your field, etc. He also encourages participation in communities and online discussions. Social networking sites also offer firms another venue to promote firm news. “Whenever there is a newsworthy development at your firm – a significant case, a new hire, professional recognition such as an award – let people know about it,” Jacobsen said. “Social networks provide an additional means for people to find your firm, learn about it and connect with you.”

3. EMPHASIZE THE FIRM'S PERSONALITY.

When Pryor Cashman decided to redesign its site, the firm chose to include a homepage that featured a unique series of images and expressions, designed to reflect the firm's character. “One of the hardest things I did was that I had to pitch [a nontraditional theme] to the executive committee,” Wall said. “It was not going to be columns, books, all buildings – this was going to be even more of a nature flow: pyramids, ballerinas and fish.”

Expressions were showcased on the homepage like, “The deeper the well, the harder it is to bring the resource to the surface,” and “Achieving difficult goals requires digging further – using intelligence and strong networks, we reach the core and get it done.” These quotes were the result of a project on firm identity Wall conducted when she first started at the firm; she asked attorneys and staff what made the firm different and what made them want to stay. These were the statements she received that leave a stronger and much more sincere impression than standard marketing jargon. Including a touch of personality can also help increase brand image. One of Romanovich's clients, a personal injury practice, hopes to present a more positive image of its legal practice by building a community-type atmosphere in which readers can weigh in on some of the

different injury-related topics, such as consumer rights and advocacy.

“You do a quick sample of sentiment with the general audience, and [there's a sense of] these guys are ambulance chasers,” Romanovich said. “They're hoping to actually further their image by showcasing some of the good work that they're doing.” Adding a blog to your site can also help prospective clients learn more about the firm's philosophy and approach, Jacobsen said – and help increase a firm's perceived value. Another blog bonus: They'll help you show up more frequently in searches. “Search engines value blog content, as it provides new, timely information, so effective blogging can help a firm's search marketing program and significantly improve its search engine ranking,” he said.

4. DETERMINE WHAT NOT TO INCLUDE.

Some site enhancements may not necessarily help sell your firm's message or be worth the added expense. Pryor Cashman, for example, opted to use limited Flash elements on its site because Wall said the firm was concerned about the amount of time the site would take to load. Wick's firm initially considered adding 15- to 30-second video clips, which it had seen on other firm sites, featuring firm attorneys talking about themselves or demonstrating their passion or expertise level. However, the firm decided not to include videos. “It added a fair amount of expense; you have to bring a production team, edit it—and after the cost-benefit analysis, we didn't believe it was right for us,” he said.

5. ENCOURAGE VIEWERS TO RESPOND.

Your firm doesn't need a purely static website. Urge site visitors to engage with the firm through its site by adding calls to action. “A website shouldn't be afraid to encourage people to register for an upcoming event, download

an attorney-authored article or sign up for a newsletter,” according to Kraft. Integrating blogging with other social media components can also encourage readers to interact and share. “The audience may feel more comfortable leaving comments if they have the ability to share content, connect to Facebook or their Twitter profile,” Romanovich said.

6. SHOWCASE YOUR STAFF.

“I’ve seen some firms not include pictures of their attorneys, and I think that’s a mistake – they are our product,” Wall said. Although some smaller firms may be hesitant to include the number of attorneys they employ on their site, adding bios can help highlight your staff’s achievements and expertise, which can be a strong selling point despite how many or few attorneys you employ. “A big firm has a lot of lawyers, and the perception is that a big firm is going to have a number of experts,” Wick said. “You can be a mid-sized firm with extremely highly qualified lawyers. At the end of the day, it’s not the number of the lawyers, but the quality.”

7. UTILIZE SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION.

“A major change just in the last year has been the increasing emphasis on local results by search engines,” Jacobsen said. “Search engines have become increasingly effective at providing localized results for keyword searches such as ‘personal injury attorney Miami.’” The result: It’s important to plan for SEO optimization when designing your site. According to Jacobsen, search algorithms and display formats for providing local results are increasingly emphasized and rapidly evolving. “Tying into those local results often requires new methods of optimizing websites and leveraging local-oriented services such as Google Places.”

8. CONTROL MAINTENANCE COSTS.

Creating the site is just half the battle; once that’s completed, you’ll need to plan for frequent updates. “A firm’s website and overall web program needs to be continually managed and updated; [that’s] essential for engaging prospective clients, targeting new business opportunities and building effective search engine optimization,” said Jacobsen. Outsourcing the update process can

HOW TO SELECT THE PERFECT WEB DESIGN/CONTENT PROVIDER

Many firms – particularly smaller ones – may opt to outsource website writing and design work. If your firm is considering a redesign, ask your firm leadership and potential provider partners the following questions:

What are you trying to achieve with your site? Firms should ask themselves, “What is their client base? How do they reach it? How does the firm stand out in the marketplace?” according to Mark Jacobsen, Senior Director of Product Development at FindLaw.

What look will best echo your firm’s personality? “The design should reinforce the image the firm is trying to present,” Jacobsen said.

Does the tone sound right? Pryor Cashman outsourced much of its writing and ended up using three writers for the site. The writers, said Marketing Director Elizabeth Wall, didn’t understand the firm. “They just weren’t listening to us and understanding what makes us unique and different,” she said. “We ended up hiring a client of ours who is a romance novelist, and did it as a side project. She’s known us for 20 years and was familiar with the firm, so it was much easier for her.”

What structure helps viewers easily find what they’re looking for? “Website design is about more than just having nice colors and a good logo,” said Christopher Kraft, Hubbard One Senior Director of Product Management. “It has to have effective usability so that visitors can quickly and easily find the information they need – good site navigation, search capabilities and integrated social media channels.”



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be expensive. Wick Phillips helped control costs by establishing an online management system in which firm members can make 90 percent of the required edits. "A lot of large firms probably have whole teams internally working on keeping their site updated," said Wick. As a mid-sized firm, they are able to keep the site fresh and relevant without having added a variable cost every month.

9. STRESS SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS.

Pryor Cashman's site includes a section on how the firm has worked to become green, reflecting a client request. "We've seen questions about our environmental policies in a couple of RFPs, and they also ask about our diversity initiatives," Wall said. The firm had increased its green efforts by

adding recycling containers, moving to a new, sustainable office space in Times Square and switching to recycled paper. The changes didn't vastly increase expenses, but promoting them via the firm's website could help attract new business. "It costs two or three cents more a sheet to use recycled paper, but ultimately, we might get one more matter by communicating that we have a policy in place," Wall said. *

about the author

Erin Brereton is a freelance writer based in Chicago, Illinois. A specialist in legal and financial coverage, Brereton can be reached at breretonerin@gmail.com or through her website, www.chicagojournalist.com.



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