

Polish your firm's online image

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Everyone knows that you should have a Web site, but how much thought have you given to what's on it? The impression that potential clients get about you from your site—and from other sources in cyberspace—is important.

Attorneys often hear that their most valuable asset is their reputation. With the advent of social networking and the interactive Web, that advice rings true now more than ever.

In today's connected world, you know that prospective clients are going straight to the Web to check you out. If they have your name or your firm's name, they will type it into a search engine. They may find you even without knowing your name if you are savvy—or lucky—enough to be on the first page of Google's search results when prospective clients search for a lawyer in their area who handles a certain type of case.

Now, with the ubiquity of social networking, prospective clients may research you and your firm online without ever visiting your Web site. Regardless of where they go to find out about you, the image you portray to the public on the Web is extremely important. Your prospective client wants to get a sense of who you are—personally and professionally—before calling your office.

You manage the first impression that your clients get of your firm by the look of your reception area, the way you dress, and your phone presence. Your Web site should be no different. Now is the time to think strategically about every aspect of your online presence. Your image, your brand, and your reputation are too important to leave to chance.

If you are ready to be proactive with your professional image, you need to take a comprehensive approach. Start by doing some basic self-analysis. Ask yourself:

- Who is your target audience?
- What image do you want to project?
- Have you given your Web site a critical and unbiased evaluation?
- Do the imagery and content of your site project the right image, or will an archaic design tarnish your firm's credibility?
- Would online video improve your firm's image?
- Does your online bio communicate what you want it to?

■ Have you identified and analyzed your competitors' sites?

■ Have you identified the social-networking sites that might be helpful (or harmful) to your image?

■ Are you using online press releases about your firm's successes to project the right image?

The first step in managing your online identity is to determine what audience you want to target. For instance, does your firm speak directly to personal injury victims and their families, or do you focus on developing referral relationships with other attorneys? The answer to this question should determine the direction of your online marketing.

Does your Web site project the image you want? Is it written to appeal to your target audience? Try to evaluate your site in an unbiased manner. This may mean asking an outside consultant—or even a good friend who will give you honest feedback—to review the site from the perspective of the audience you want to reach.

The key is to do a thorough “cover to cover” evaluation and be honest about your conclusions. You want to build a relationship with your audience through imagery, video, and the information you provide.¹

Your competition

You can't create your online identity or manage your professional image in a vacuum. Have you browsed through your competitors' Web sites? If you have, you've noticed that different firms and attorneys present themselves differently.

Some firms' Web sites present a corporate and legal face (scales of justice, courtroom photos, and cityscapes, for example). Some lawyers highlight their settlements and verdicts. Others focus on credentials like their AV ratings or listings in *Super Lawyers* or *Best Lawyers in America*. A few law firms' sites focus on how they help their clients by using images of attorneys interacting with clients, along with client testimonials and endorsements—in writing and on video.

Don't look at just the imagery and video. Read the content. Do your com-

petitors use their content to strategically position themselves as experts in their areas? Also check out how well they perform on the search engines; for example, do they show up in the search results when you search for lawyers in your area who handle specific types of cases?

You may have noticed that many lawyers continue to rely on outdated Web sites that lack a cohesive strategy. If you take the time to do it, a review of your competitors' sites will not only give you some ideas for your own site and online image but also help you identify

your competitors' weaknesses and your own opportunities.

After a thorough competitive analysis, ask yourself which style is right for you. How does your firm's personality compare and contrast with those of your competitors? Your goal should be to position yourself and your firm in a unique way that will stand out from the competition and project a positive and professional image.

Imagery and video

Since the average Web site viewer probably will stay on your site less than three minutes and may also check out two or three competitors' sites before deciding whom to contact, you have to make an immediate impact.

Avoid stereotypes if you want to stand out. It's fine to be patriotic, but know that there are hundreds of lawyers with red, white, and blue Web sites. The most notorious cliché in legal Web site design is the gavel. When using law-related imagery, it's hard to be original.

A good designer should be creative enough to visually set your Web site apart from those of your competitors. We rec-

ommend that you devote time to creating a unique look and feel for your Web site to help demonstrate your firm's professionalism and the empathy that you show your clients.

One way to do this is to use unique images of your offices, your attorneys, and your clients. Incorporate some humanity—people connect with people. While a corporate look can work, avoid a site design that appears sterile. Make sure your site highlights real people, including photos of you interacting with your clients. Local imagery will also help you

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connect with people in your area.

In our experience, a Web site that both projects a professional image and connects with prospective clients on a human level is more likely to be successful. It allows the visitor to know and feel more comfortable with the attorney and the firm. Visitors believe they are finally meeting a professional who can help them with their problem. If your competitors' sites are sterile and yours is both professional and inviting, you are more likely to get the call.

You can make your Web site warm and inviting in numerous ways. Images are great, but video is better. Incorporating

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