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Your Guide to Getting on the Web: Starting from Scratch

Don't have a Web site yet? Don't despair! Here's how to get a site up and running quickly

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Lawyers who surf the Web on a regular basis undoubtedly make an effort (consciously or not) to see the presence their competitors have in cyberspace. When a Web-surfing lawyer has a Web site or works at a firm that has one, an examination of other lawyers' sites can yield important information that the Web surfer might use to improve his or her site. A lawyer who does not yet have a Web site may seem to have no choice but to sigh and view competitor sites with envy.

Well, it's time to turn that negative feeling into something more positive!

Although the vast majority of large law firms and indeed perhaps every single large law firm may already have a Web site, and although most medium-sized firms have them as well, there still are many solo practitioners and smaller firms that do not. The failure to have a Web site already is, at the least, unusual; lawyers and firms that do not remedy that situation in the very near future will certainly be making a serious and perhaps fatal business and tactical mistake. So get cracking!

Why Have a Web Site?

There are three reasons to have a Web site, according to Ezra Crawford, vice president and business director at Jaffe Associates Inc. in Washington, D.C. First, it can serve as a recruiting tool for lawyers, legal secretaries and other staff members. A Web site can also be a useful resource to attract in-house counsel who might seek to retain the

firm or for lawyers who may refer matters to the firm. Finally, Web sites are an important marketing tool to which prospective clients — from personal injury plaintiffs and individual debtors seeking bankruptcy counsel to divorcing spouses and home buyers — are turning with increasing frequency.

A firm that knows why it is interested in developing a Web site — that knows, in other words, its intended audience — can take the next step in the process: finding appropriate help to get the job done. That is not as difficult as it initially may sound. According to Jennifer L. Smuts, the Harrisburg-based director of business development and marketing at McNees Wallace & Nurick L.L.C., lawyers can find the right Web site consultant to create and design their Web site by speaking with legal marketing advisers or by asking for referrals from their bar association. Another solution, she says, relies on the information derived from visiting other law firm Web sites: "Speak with someone you know who has a Web site you like."

Beginning the Process

After the firm settles on a Web site consultant, the parties should negotiate an agreement covering the scope and cost of the assignment. Ezra Crawford of Jaffe believes that the agreement should describe the "scope of the project with itemized estimates for particular aspects of the project." The potential for cost overruns should be clearly explained ahead of time and, he says, the final bill should be within 10 percent of the estimated total.

Another issue to be resolved in the contract is the ownership of the site. Crawford believes that "law firms should own" their sites, including the code that the consultant writes for the firm and the site's graphic elements (such as photographs and other artwork). This means, in essence, that the consultant "can't just change the color on one firm's Web page and sell it to another firm," even if the consultant retains title to "the proprietary code" that the consultant has developed to use in creating law firm Web sites.

The 'Creative Concept'

Lawyers who have visited other law firm Web sites should not only be able to find a consultant, but, explains Gail W. Ruopp, executive director of Flaster/Greenberg P.C. in Southern New Jersey, they can give their consultants a good head start in the design process by "writing down what you like and don't like." Should the site have full site search capabilities? Photos of individual lawyers? In color? What about links to outside resources? Ruopp believes that by using this information and the answers to these questions as a "foundation" to design the site map for the Web site, the consultant can begin to move the process along.

There are templates available, at a relatively low cost, that can quickly create a Web site for a lawyer or small firm. If the template user is not concerned about the possibility of down-the-block or around-the-corner competing law firms having virtually the same kind of site and is not troubled by the low cost "look and feel" of such a site, that is a plausible way to go.

Where a firm decides that it wants a more customized approach, however, the next step is to have it designed. The design process need not necessarily be a big deal. However, where a solo or small firm's lawyers only have business cards and letterhead and do not have a logo or "color scheme," Crawford suggests that a graphic designer be consulted. The

designer can also come up with the "creative concept" for the Web site and prepare a "graphic mock-up of the home page and the interior pages" of the site. Flaster/Greenberg's Ruopp suggests staying away from "stereotypical lawyer graphics" and limiting the use of "stock" photography; her firm commissioned a photographer to take photographs of the New Jersey, Southeastern Pennsylvania and Wilmington, Del., areas for its site.

Jennifer Smuts of McNees Wallace also suggests that firms stay away from "Flash" technology or other similar graphics that will slow down users attempting to access a Web site; indeed, she says, "people using dial-up may never get to a site" overloaded with fancy graphics and design elements. Simply put, a Web site should be aesthetically pleasing and user-friendly.

Data, Data, Data

While the design process is going on, the consultant can be working with the firm's lawyers and staff to create the database for the site. This information will include:

- The history of the firm;
- The firm's client-service principles;
- Bios of the firm's attorneys and perhaps even of the office managers or other employees;
- Articles written by the firm's lawyers either in full text or referenced by the names of the publications in which they have appeared and the dates the articles were published;
- Recent firm newsletters, white papers or other firm publications, including the firm brochure and practice descriptions;
- News about the firm;
- Services offered by the firm;
- A list of representative clients;

- A brief explanation of the technology used by the firm;
- The firm's pro bono and community involvement;
- Current job openings; and
- Contact information for the firm, plus a map and directions page.

Building the Site

After the lawyers review the mock-up and the consultant makes the requested changes, the consultant will begin to "build" the site. As Jaffe's Crawford explains, there are two kinds of Web pages that need to be constructed: "static" pages and "dynamic" pages.

A static Web page, which, for example, might contain the firm's office location and directions, is a page that requires a programmer to "go in and change it," Crawford points out. By contrast, a dynamic page, such as a page for profiles, practice descriptions or recruiting, is one that an employee of the law firm can update by himself or herself without outside help. "It is tied to a content management system that is database driven," Crawford says, and if a person can use a word processing program, the person can update a dynamic Web page. The more dynamic pages in a Web site, the less of a need there will be for a firm to pay a monthly Web maintenance fee. Jennifer Smuts believes that a Web site should be "refreshed or updated" on a weekly basis, at a minimum, so the ability to do that in-house or the need to pay an outsider should not be ignored. Ruopp says that at Flaster/Greenberg an employee spends about five hours per week updating and maintaining the firm's Web site.

After the mock-up is approved, it is "tested" by the consultant on a test "server," which simulates how it will

appear and operate when it is hosted on an actual server. If the site passes the critique, the consultant will migrate the site to a permanent server. Here, too, there is a choice: The consultant, on the firm's behalf, or, more preferably, the firm itself, can contract with a shared server or a dedicated server. A shared server is less expensive than a dedicated server, but cost is only one factor that should go into the decision. As Crawford notes, a shared server is more likely to fail than a dedicated server, leaving clients and potential clients unable to visit the firm's site. A shared server may also be slower than a dedicated server, depending on how many people try to visit the sites served by the shared server at the same time.

Enjoy!

Once that's all done and the site is turned on, the firm should follow the "opening strategy" it has developed by reaching out to the media, sending e-mail to clients about the new site, adding the Web site address to business cards and letterhead, and including the address on the automatic signature information it places on e-mail sent by the firm.

Then, it can start reaping the benefits of the cyberworld!

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