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Your Guide to Getting on the Web: Content Is King

Here are the rules of effective Web writing: Be factual. Be brief. Be clear

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The young husband and wife who are about to move to your town and purchase a home are right outside your office, waiting to enter, as ready to make a purchase as a family of tourists at a gift shop. All the couple has to do is read your sign, ring your bell, open your door and step into your reception area. Then you can explain to them how you can represent them in their upcoming real estate transaction, highlight your experience, answer their questions and sign them up. Pretty straightforward, and you have done it hundreds of times.

But what if they are not standing on the street outside your building but rather are sitting at their computer? And what if they are not at your office door, but rather at your Web site, the cyberspace portal to your firm? And

what if they can turn away from your Web site in an instant, by a click of their mouse and go to a competitor law firm's site — or two or three different competitor sites — and choose their attorney from among that group? This is not something you have faced hundreds of times, and, maybe, if you are just now thinking of getting a Web site, it is not something you have faced at all.

Don't worry, though. There is a way you can keep these potential clients interested in you and your firm. Make sure that the content on your Web site does its job.

'The Most Important Thing'

As explained by Debra C. Andrews, the managing director of Marketri L.L.C., a Doylestown-based marketing adviser to small and mid-sized law firms

and other professional service organizations, there are various component parts that make up a Web site, including navigation (how one moves around the site), design (what the site looks like), search engine optimization (steps that can help the site appear high on the list of results following a computer user's Web search) and content (the words on the site). In her opinion, there is no doubt as to what is key to an effective site: "Content is the most important thing!"

This is a concept that should not be foreign to lawyers who draft briefs, negotiate contracts, prepare wills and trusts or write articles for outside publications or their firm newsletters. The hitch is, however, that writing for the Web is different from all of these other kinds of writing. Indeed, Richard Kauffman, a principal in Philadelphia's Panoptic Communications, a design and technology firm specializing in online communications, believes that "writing for the Web is an art."

Fortunately, it is an art with some pretty clear rules.

The Crucial Distinction

Kauffman believes that the Web is different from other media. He says that the Web is not like a magazine, where advertisements have to stand out from other ads and from the articles or get passed over, and it is not like television, where the commercials have to compete with the shows and maintain viewer interest despite numerous distractions. As Kauffman explains, the Web is "narrowcasting" not "broadcasting." A Web site communicates with a visitor on a one-to-one basis, as an individual. When it comes to Web content, this means that there are certain things that should be avoided and certain things that should be included.

Things to Avoid

Writing for a law firm's Web site should not be "marketing oriented" but should be "factual," according to Kauffman. A visitor to a law firm's Web site does not want to read, "We are the best" or "We stand out from the crowd." A Web site visitor "does not have the patience for that," and the site does not have to grab the potential client's attention — he or she is already there!

It is also important for a site not to use overly "creative" labels for its different sections or pages, but rather to identify those links in a way that is intuitive and logical. Kauffman notes that in the past Web sites attempted to try to use variations on the name of the "About Us" section, but that now the better practice is to use that phrase because that is what people expect to see. The same goes for a section of a law firm's Web site that includes lawyers' published articles; that section can be called "Publications," "Library" or "News," but anything else, Kauffman believes, can risk "annoying" a visitor, leading the visitor to give up and click on a competitor's site.

Debra Andrews of Marketri also says that Web copy should not be lengthy or have "endless detail," adding that "short paragraphs are better than long ones." Richard C. DeLuca, the director of business development of Stark & Stark in Lawrenceville, N.J., agrees with that, and says that "a lot of times, less is more." He emphasizes that the firm overview on his firm's Web site contains only four sentences!

In addition, there are things that a law firm should avoid when including content on its Web site in an effort to place high in the results of online search requests, according to Greg Sutphin, a regional manager of Thomson/FindLaw

based in Prospect Park. For example, Sutphin believes it is a bad idea to try to manipulate search engines by writing words such as “personal injury law” in the background of a page in the same color as the background or to repeat a word such as “lawyer” in a site’s meta tags (information inserted into a key area of a Web page); doing so, he says, can lead a search engine to reject a Web site from its database, which will mean that it will *never* turn up on that search engine.

What to Include

There are just as many rules relating to what *should* be included in a Web site. For example, Panoptic Communications’ Kauffman says that there are effective ways to use content to optimize search engine results, such as by “putting key words” in the text on the site and naming files to reflect the firm’s practice areas. He also believes that it is better to have many separate pages, each of which should focus on a different subject, than to have just one page with many subjects. As Kauffman explains, when a page only says “real estate,” a higher percentage of the words on the page relate to real estate than when it says “real estate,” “trusts and estates,” “bankruptcy” and “litigation.”

A law firm’s site must also include information to answer the questions a visitor is likely to have. According to Kauffman, this includes “contact information, such as how do I call you, how do I e-mail you, where are you located and what are your hours of operation?” Although it is being reached by the World Wide Web, a firm should not neglect including its mailing address, including its ZIP code, on its Web site.

A site should also answer questions about the firm and its lawyers and what they do. Toward that end, DeLuca of

Stark & Stark recommends that firms include biographies of their attorneys, all of which should be written in the same format and all of which should have the same information, such as where the lawyers went to college and law school, their areas of practice and their contact information.

In addition, DeLuca states that a firm should include all articles and other written materials and presentations on its Web site; his firm does so in an effort to be recognized as “thought leaders on timely topics.” That can go a long way to keeping a site fresh, enticing visitors to return or to mention the site (and the law firm) to others.

DeLuca also has a suggestion for a way lawyers can improve the content on their own Web sites: Look at other firms’ sites and see if they have any information that is appealing but absent from your own. DeLuca notes that once he saw that a competitor firm had a “Media Kit” on its Web site, he decided to add it to his firm’s site. “Now it’s one of our most visited pages,” he declares.

The Client Comes First

Ultimately, a firm’s Web site has to be written for the user, whether existing clients, prospective clients, referral sources or some combination. The content should be in a form and of a nature that the visitor will find useful, while meeting the goals of the firm. Simply put, the easier it is to navigate a firm’s site and to find the information that the user wants and needs, the less likely it is that the user will throw up his or her hands in disgust and move to another firm’s site.

A Web site can be the first impression a potential client has about a firm.

Make it a good one!

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