

# A site to behold



**Experts weigh in on what's hot, what's not in law firm websites**

By Noah Schaffer

When's the last time your firm's website was updated?

If the answer is the day that it launched, you're missing out on an opportunity to reach potential new clients and stay in touch with existing ones, according to web designers and online marketing experts.

"It sounds so obvious, but a lot of firms don't think about it," says Vanessa Schaefer, president and creative director of Clockwork Design Group, a Woburn firm that has designed websites for several of Boston's largest firms.

Schaefer warns against static sites that offer only generic attorney bios and photos — especially ones that have "novels of information about 'what we do and where we're from.' You

need to write about yourself in terms that tell your client

how you can benefit them. You need information that is educational to your audience — clients and *potential* clients," she says.

To attract repeat visitors, Schaefer suggests holding webinars and sending out e-mail newsletters that contain links back to the firm's site.

"If there's something going on in the world today that one of your attorneys or practice groups are involved with, that's something you want to leverage," she says.

#### **Sophistication and specialization**

With telephone books quickly on the way to becoming obsolete, "the Internet has become a major

factor in the client's process of evaluating and hiring attorneys," says Steven O'Brien, a senior consultant with the legal information website FindLaw.

"Law firm websites are becoming more sophisticated and specialized; it's not sufficient just to put up a web page anymore," warns O'Brien. "The bottom-line is people are now using websites to evaluate firms. Site designs are becoming more unique, and the sites are providing much more information about an attorney's experience and specific capabilities."

In fact, Jennifer A. Irvine, the marketing and business development director at Sherin & Lodgen in Boston, says her firm soon will be adding more case studies to its site.

Users, she says, need to be able to determine within a few clicks "what are the firm's capabilities,

and do the attorneys have experience with businesses like mine?"

Likewise, the Boston firm of Lahive & Cockfield is redesigning its site to feature case studies more prominently.

"Case studies are a way to portray a real life example of something that can happen to anyone and show how we went about helping and what the outcome was," says marketing director Kirsten Lovett.

With tens of thousands of attorneys practicing in the state, O'Brien says, lawyers need to make sure their websites stand out. "In today's legal marketplace even the best attorneys can negatively affect their practice by having a site that looks 'homemade' or by providing no information at all," he says.

Even clients that are referred will look for information online first before calling, he adds. "It's crucial that your website accurately reflects the sophistication of your practice and provides specific information."

### Billboard in a cornfield

But all bets are off the table if the would-be client can't actually find your site, says O'Brien, who points to a local firm that recently spent a large chunk of its marketing budget to redesign its website.

"The site looked beautiful and they were proud of it," he recalls.

But when O'Brien typed the firm's name into Google, the site did not show up. Searches for its practice area similarly yielded no hits.

It turns out the designer had created a flash presentation covering the entire homepage, O'Brien says, which meant that the automated Google search software found no information.

"As you can imagine, the managing partner was very unhappy when I pointed this out," he says. "Whoever creates your site needs to have not only solid design skills, but also needs a firm understanding of how search engines work. What this firm was left with was a great looking work of art that few will ever see — like a billboard in the middle of a corn field."

Search-word optimization is already common in practice areas that directly market to potential individual clients, such as personal injury. But O'Brien says it can help even those firms that normally get clients via referrals.

"A firm that has a thriving divorce practice may not think it needs a website," he says. "But 52 percent of the people who get married end up getting divorced, so there are literally thousands of people in Massachusetts who are seeking a divorce lawyer online. They're going to find someone to help them. A firm that has a visible website is going to land new clients as a result."

### 'Take them off!'

Firms that plan to redesign their sites should consider whether the visual appearance is appropriate for the practice, Schaefer says.

"Firms that focus on IP have a more tech-savvy clientele, so we advise them to consider that when they are designing their site," she says. "Firms that have a more conservative client base might want to have a design that is more conservative and wouldn't come across as being too jazzy and crazy to an older and more mature audience."

But law firms can also play it too safe, says Schaefer.

"The handshake photo, the skyline photo, the gavel,

the scales of justice — take them off!" she pleads. "We'll tell that to attorneys, and they'll ask how people will know they're a law firm without those clichés. But I'd rather see your attorneys interact as they really work. Let's see them functioning together. You should show the personality of the firm."

Lawyers should also consider what their web designers need to know about the legal world.

North Attleboro attorney Afton M. Templin is currently redesigning her website. While the designers recommended by her colleagues were seeking upwards of \$3,000, a local designer offered to do the job for only \$500.

"It's working out OK, but I can see why she was a lot less expensive," says Templin, who designed her first site herself.

The challenge, Templin says, "has been trying to communicate with her the needs of a legal website versus just a business website. For example, what search terms are going to be used; why I need to have the disclaimer on the bottom; and why I need a copy of the files for my archives," she says.


Lahive & Cockfield is also in the middle of redesigning its site courtesy of a web designer who does not primarily work with law firms.

"I think it helped give us a fresh look on the design side," says Lovett. "They brought in some technology pieces to set up back end that we might not have gotten from somebody who just works with law firms."

But Lovett has also had to explain certain details, such as the need for a disclaimer stating that an unsolicited e-mail sent to a firm attorney is not confidential or privileged.

Meanwhile, many non-legal websites are trying to focus on so-called "Web 2.0" content, which encourages interactivity among users rather than a one-way flow of information.

Although many attorneys are understandably hesitant about anything that puts information they have not screened onto their site, Schaefer says that more firms are at least thinking about where their sites are headed in the future.

"Now you have attorneys blogging," she says. "Five years ago, that was unheard of." 

## And the winners are ...

Lawyers Weekly asked the following "experts" to select a law firm website that impresses them:

**The expert:** Steven O'Brien, senior consultant, FindLaw  
**The law firm:** Morgan, Brown & Joy  
**The website:** [www.morganbrown.com](http://www.morganbrown.com)

*The information-packed front page contains upcoming events and recent articles as well as an invitation to subscribe to the firm's e-mail newsletters. The images are of attorneys interacting together. The photos of each attorney are slideshows that go from full-body shots to close-ups. O'Brien says the site leaves a "very professional impression. It clearly lets me know exactly what they do and expresses they are a market leader."*



**The expert:** Afton M. Templin, North Attleboro attorney  
**The law firm:** Wilson, Marino & Bonnevie  
**The website:** [www.wmlawfirm.com](http://www.wmlawfirm.com)



*The bio page contains brief descriptions of the firm's three attorneys, with the option of clicking to learn more about each one. The site provides potential clients with insightful, plain-English explanations of terms such as mediation and collaborative law. Templin, who is a client of the firm, says she likes the original olive and burgundy color scheme and succinct content. "Their website reflects their down-to-earth personalities," she says.*

**The expert:** Vanessa Schaefer, Clockwork Design Group  
**The firm:** Choate, Hall & Stewart (recruiting site)  
**The website:** [www.choate.com/careers.php](http://www.choate.com/careers.php)

*Choate's offbeat recruiting site includes YouTube-style satire and videos of summer associates. "Humor in general is something that is lacking in law firm websites," Schaefer says. "It's tough to be a little playful, because law firms want to be taken seriously. But there are ways to do it, and Choate did it exceptionally well."*



**The expert:** Kirsten Lovett, marketing director, Lahive & Cockfield  
**The law firm:** Bromberg & Sunstein  
**The website:** [www.bromsun.com](http://www.bromsun.com)



*When she was in the process of redesigning her own firm's website, Lovett noticed that nearly all firms used one of just a handful of templates. But Bromberg's site, she says, is "different. There may be too much on the homepage, but it does a great job of conveying the depth of their experience and what they do."*