



CLIENT-FRIENDLY WEB SITES

ROAD-TESTED TACTICS

By Micah Buchdahl

Think you're using the Web to draw in clients? You might want to double-check. You could be driving them away instead. How can you turn your Web site into the ultimate client development and service tool? Take a page from the kings of the road.

As we approach the second real decade of “Internet life” as we know it, many law firms are on the third, fourth or fifth iteration of their Web sites. For most, the Web is no longer a distinct entity. Instead, it has found a comfortable place as part of a firm’s overall marketing strategy.

But just how comfortable do clients find their actual *use* of your Web site? If you want to join the ranks of law firm sites that continue to evolve and progress into what could be the ultimate client development and service tool, here’s what to do: Learn from the firms that genuinely understand what makes a Web site client-friendly.

Pay Attention to Traffic Reports

Based on my experiences, most law practices, of all sizes, still need to dedicate more time to the evaluation of their Web site traffic. The Internet provides the most detail you will ever receive from a marketing investment. Plus, the cost of excellent, live-result site traffic reporting can amount to just a few dollars a month. Given the exceptional return on investment, why do so many firms continue to either ignore the data or fail to comprehend the value of determining traffic patterns?

Traffic reports can provide details on the visitor, pages visited, time spent, the exit page and the referring Web site link. You can even see what keyword search the visitor input into a search engine to find his or her way to you.

Perhaps most important is the ability to learn what your clients like and dislike about your site. If a section gets little traffic, for example, it means that people either do not care for the content or fail to find it as a result of poor navigation or placement. Make no mistake, people are telling you what they want from your site. You just need to properly interpret the stats.

Here’s a tip: Test the ease of navigating and searching your firm’s site yourself. It’s an easy task. Look for things

Today’s “**new**” provides the potential for awesome, cost-effective **marketing and client service tools** —if used for good, instead of evil.

both broad and highly specific. Surf from one area of the site to the next. If you can’t find what you are looking for with amazing ease, think about all the things your visitors have been looking for. Assume that a number of them left for good long ago.

Stash the Flash

Usability surveys repeatedly show that “pretty” means very little in terms of a user’s experience. As in life itself, on the Internet it’s truly about what’s inside that counts. In the case of Web sites (like many of my dates from those old single days), the looks quickly lose their

impact if you have nothing interesting to say.

The most successful home pages today serve as high-tech billboards highlighting the fresh and the new—headlines on pending industry regulations, developments in case law, just-published articles by firm members, recent wins and a variety of news updates. The point is that the fresh contents give visitors a reason to return.

Check out your firm’s site, and ask yourself if there is something on it that was not there the last time you looked. Same old stuff? Then think how bored your clients and other visitors must be. Many have probably already judged your site to be static in nature and, therefore, not worth a return visit.

On the other hand, news from today cues clients that they can stay on top of practice area developments, happenings at the firm and legal need-to-knows by simply bookmarking your home page and visiting time and again. Not to mention the subliminal feeling they get from receiving no-cost, added value from their often-pricey legal team.

Make E-Mail a Friend Again

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any firms provide no-cost value by sending out e-mail alerts and e-newsletters—which also serve the added purpose of luring recipients back to the firm’s Web site.

Siskind Susser

The Granddaddy

Visalaw.com supplements a great interactive, content-rich site with the Visalaw blog. The blog serves as an additional section, rather than a replacement or sister site.



Unfortunately, abuse of e-mail has become an epidemic affecting virtually everyone. Apart from concerns over viruses, spoofing and phishing, there are the general problems of spam—both keeping it out as well as not being tagged as such. An occasional peek into my spam folder (the contents of which usually get deleted without thorough review) often reveals a slew of online newsletters from legal vendors and law firms that never see the light of day.

You need to make sure that e-mail intended to entice clients to your site actually reaches the “real” inbox. The

greatest faux pas committed by many firms, however, is sending out too many e-mail communications. For months, I received weekly e-mails from one law firm that were supposed to update me on the firm and intellectual property issues. Each week the e-mail would faithfully arrive—with little to say, articles repeated and paid-for “news” bought from a vendor. Once you get stamped with my spam tag, you never find your way back.

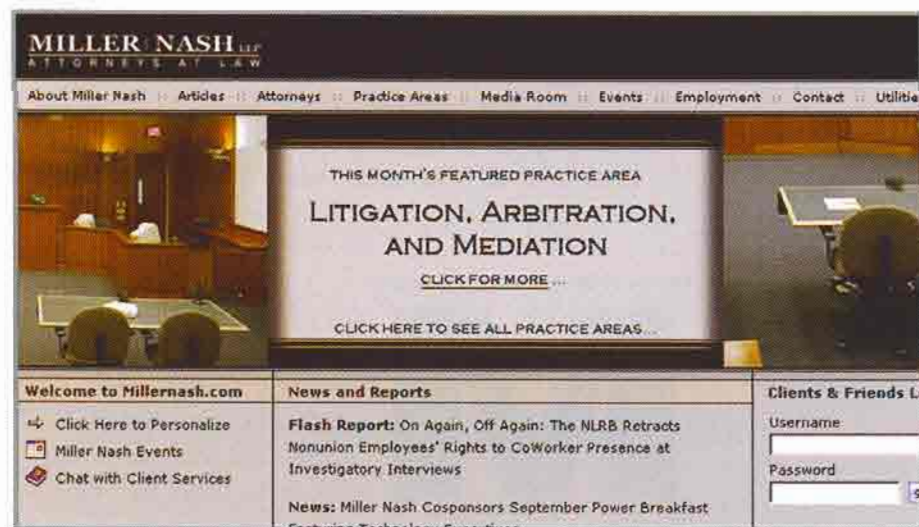
On the flip side, for years I have received informative and timely e-mails taking me back to the sites of Faegre & Benson, www.faegre.com,

and McGuireWoods, www.mcguirewoods.com, for articles and news. And from time to time, I receive e-invites to seminars and events, to which I can RSVP through the Web.

It’s like the art of providing the media with timely and truly newsworthy press releases to gain greater credibility and recognition—your use of e-mail should accomplish the same.

What’s New? What’s Out?

Remember when the key to a good law firm Web site was having a “What’s New” page? Well, today’s “new” provides the potential for awesome, cost-



Miller Nash

RSS Feed Shortcuts

Millernash.com was one of the first to offer RSS feed shortcuts for firm publications now accessible through a variety of popular readers.

effective marketing and client-service tools—if used for good, instead of evil.

Weblogs, or blogs, provide the equivalent of online journals. The bad part is that many are about as worthwhile as “Dear Diary: Today I had spaghetti for lunch.” The very good part, though, is that others provide hot discussion on topics such as a fresh Supreme Court decision or the latest filings in a high-profile suit. For some, the blog effectively replaces the standard site with an information tool that is simple, cheap and very search-engine friendly. For others, it is a great companion for the Web site, allowing the standard site to stay static while the blog provides the fresh updates.

Although they were innovative a few years ago, the effectiveness of those customized home pages has not proven a great success. Most visitors do not feel like taking the time required to set up the page or learn how it works. Many do not accept the cookie often required to do so. To make sites stronger, the trend has turned to promoting the bookmarking and saving of specific pages for future reference.

Also out is the use of generic news feeds. Let’s face it. If I want world news, I visit CNN.com, get legal news at Law.com, and grab lawyer data at Martindale.com. Tell me about your firm and news related to the practices I hire you to address.

Go to the Head of the Class

So, you want some examples of new, creative ways to reach out to clients? Here is a handful taken from the 2004-05 Internet Marketing Attorney reviews and Nifty 50 at www.internetmarketingattorney.com. (See the sidebar “Judge for Yourself.”)

■ Siskind Susser’s www.visalaw.com, which I often call the granddaddy of

Think Before You Spend:

Preparing Your Site Road Map

When it comes to planning a Web site—whether it’s your fifth one or your first one—planning and spending effectively and efficiently can sometimes slip through your grasp. You want to determine most of the strategy (not to mention budget) long before the site design begins.

Here are five don’t-miss-it spots to put on your road map.

1 Before sending out a generic RFP and waiting for the site developer proposals to roll in, set out your goals and do some serious soul-searching. Consider drafting a requirements document instead of an RFP—tell vendors what you want; do not ask them what you need. Set out budget, time frame, resources allocated, goals and concerns. Make the plan about your practice, not about the actual site.

2 Send your requirements document to a good mix of development companies. Stay away from “one-stop shops” that offer everything from sites to search engine optimization, articles to seminars. Areas like optimization are for post-release. You do not want a company that does a ton of law firm Web sites. However, you would like the company to have some experience with lawyers or similar professional services. For your candidates’ pool, pick a few of the dedicated law firm site experts (such as Firmseek or Saturno Design), along with some local and regional developers.

3 Watch out for recurring charges. Assuming that your new site will be good for three to five years, you want to keep your ongoing costs to a minimum. Avoid licensing and subscription fees. Site maintenance is very inexpensive. Updating should be simple. Hosting, SEO and traffic reports get cheaper by the day.

4 Over the past few years the phrase “content is king” has gotten more play than “oh no, you di-int” and “you go, girl!” But the truth is that if you do not have the resources or simply the gumption to update and freshen content, you are better off with a simpler, static site than one that’s trying to be new, but instead gets embarrassingly old. The mantra: Better static than stale.

5 Along the same lines, the site should be about you, by you. Take the time to write the content yourself. Canned and mass-customized copy (fill in lawyer and law firm name here) does not highlight what makes you and your firm unique and special.

—Micah Buchdahl

Judge for Yourself: The 2004-05 IMA Awards

The Internet Marketing Attorney (IMA) Awards, which recognize the top law firm Web sites around the globe, are now in their third year. Starting in 2001, I set out to rate and review firm sites based not on sizzle, but on end-user usefulness. I realized that being able to “tell it like it is” required a few hard and fast rules: I would not be involved in selling Web sites or Web-related products; not allow any type of vendor relationships; strictly prohibit advertising and sponsorship; and not solicit IMA winners for business. Combining this objectivity with years of experience in analyzing thousands of law firm Web sites, the IMA Awards have come to be widely recognized as a symbol of excellence in lawyer business development.

The IMAs are based on five criteria: design, content, usability, interactivity and intangibles. The largest 250 U.S. firms get reviewed automatically. Thousands of submissions for the small/midsize firm and international firm categories are boiled down to 25 reviews in each category.

—Micah Buchdahl

THE TOP FIVE

Here are the top five IMA Award winners in each category for 2004-05:

U.S. 250 Largest Law Firms Category

1. Faegre & Benson
2. Kilpatrick Stockton
3. Morrison & Foerster
4. Bullivant Houser Bailey
5. Holland & Hart

U.S. Small/Midsize Law Firm Category

1. Siskind Susser
2. Miller Nash
3. Shernoff Bidart & Darras
4. Parker & Waichman
5. Pierce Atwood

International Law Firm Category

1. Clark, Wilson
2. Clayton Utz
3. Simmons & Simmons
4. Osler, Hoskin & Harcourt
5. Blake, Cassels & Graydon

In addition to the IMAs, the “Nifty Fifty” list has offered up examples of unique and client-friendly site components for four years running. Read this year’s 300 site reviews and assess the Nifty Fifty for yourself at www.InternetMarketingAttorney.com.

law firm Web sites, supplements a great interactive, content-rich site with the Visalaw blog. The blog serves as an additional section, rather than as a replacement or sister site.

- Miller Nash’s site, www.millernash.com, was one of the first of a growing trend toward offering up RSS feed shortcuts for firm publications now accessible through a variety of popular readers.
- Fulbright & Jaworski cross-promotes publications and offerings in traditional print advertisements, suggesting you go and grab it at

www.fulbright.com/downloads.

- By disseminating information via “Legal Services” or “Industry Focus,” Ice Miller, www.icemiller.com, makes it easier for clients to find what’s relevant to them.
- Clients visiting Javerbaum Wurgaft Hicks & Zarin at www.jwhz.com get a crafty lesson in litigation through a “7 Stages of a Lawsuit” tutorial.
- Clark, Wilson’s “Deal Maker’s Toolbox” at www.bcrelinks.com is part of one of the coolest sites you’ll see. And clients are reminded to stop in at the firm ... because there is free Wi-Fi

in the reception area. Just bring your laptop or PDA.

- King & Spaulding suggests that clients grab a brown-bag lunch and stop in online at www.kslaw.com for a monthly “lunch and learn” on the third Tuesday of each month.
- Bullivant Houser Bailey’s site, www.bullivant.com, has taken personalization on the Web to a whole new level. It features “Web notes,” the equivalent of yellow sticky notes that can be left on particular pages of the site for a client to read. It’s like when you cut out an article for a client and attach a little note

Clark, Wilson Cool Customer

Among the coolest sites you'll see, BCRELinks.com includes a "Deal Maker's Toolbox" and an invite to clients to come down to the firm to take advantage of free WiFi.

Developed by:
CLARK, WILSON
BC's Law Firm for Business
Commercial Real Estate Group

BCRELinks.com®
The Deal Maker's Toolbox®

Tuesday, September 14
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Feature Article: [Dirty Real Estate in BC - Part II: A New Era for Business or More of the Same?](#)

Hot Topics:

- [New Victoria Seniors Care Home](#)
- [Intrawest Posts Q2 Profit](#)

explaining the relevance—but you're doing the exact same thing virtually. Combined with the "Web assistant" function, this one is reaching a new plane.

The self-proclaimed "founders of insurance bad faith law" at Shernoff Bidart & Darras, www.sbd-law.com, know that their clients come from totally different ends of the spectrum. The site is divided into "Consumer Resources" and "Attorney Resources," allowing the firm to present its message to vastly different types of clientele in an appropriate manner.

What's Holding You Back?

As you can tell, law firms have not run out of creative ideas for how to stand out online among clients, and for some, the goal of becoming a "destination site" is now a reality. For others, sticking to the basics—bios, practice descriptions, directions—is enough, as they use other means of promoting the practice to current and future clients.

But the essential fact is that firms of all sizes and practice specialties, in urban to rural locales, and with widely differing strategies, have figured out that clients prefer their information on

the Web when it's presented in creative, energetic and still usable ways. With development options less expensive than they were a couple of years ago, there are few excuses left not to take advantage of the Web's capabilities. Go ahead. Your clients are waiting. ^{1P}

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LAWYERS FOR INSURANCE POLICYHOLDERS

CONTACT SITE MAP GLOSSARY LOGIN

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search go

QUICK JUMP

MAKE YOUR CASE
Are you being treated unfairly by your insurance company? If so, you may have a real legal case...
[tell us your story now](#)

Shernoff Bidart & Darras Different Spectrums

Sbd-law.com is divided into "Consumer Resources" and "Attorney Resources," allowing the firm to present its message to vastly different types of clientele in an appropriate manner.