

Chapter 2

Why You Should Get a Web Site

By: Ronald L. Burdge, Dayton, Ohio

© 2007

A surprising number of solo practitioners and small law firms are still debating the value and usefulness of a law firm web site. Recent studies and trends now support the need for a web site more than ever before.

Why You Need a Web Site

Having a web site is critical to financial success.

For about 15 years, we have kept track of the way our consumer clients come to us for help. Up until the late 1990's, about 90% of our clients were referred to us by other attorneys and previous clients, and only about 10% came from other sources (including the yellow page ad's that we had run for years, in one form or another). In the absence of wide spread internet use by consumers, those numbers made sense and were probably typical of much of the profession.

Much has been written about the value of building a referral network, and attorney and former client referrals are still very important but it has become obvious that wide spread consumer use of the internet has clearly changed everything in the last decade.

With ever increasing consumer use of the internet, it is no wonder that Google, Yahoo, and MSN are of major importance in the marketing of legal services (and everything else). Together, more than 81% of all internet searches flow thru these three search engine sites.

The viability of the phone book yellow pages, for a broad-based serious marketing effort by attorneys is under serious question, although the practice of using big yellow page ads has been a frequent target of professional disrespect, even though it had obvious merits. Now, even the Yellow Pages have gone to the internet with their own web site and numerous imitators.

Studies and articles now show that consumers are shifting from using the phone book to using the internet as a source for locally needed information and assistance. That pretty much means that every attorney needs to think very seriously about having a professional web site, no matter how many pages of

depth you make it.

It is common for researchers now to wonder aloud if the internet is the new yellow pages and for good reason. More than 80% of America's homes have a computer (almost all of them use the internet) and over half of those have broadband (i.e., high-speed) ability. And the numbers will be even higher in the coming years because over 98% of US schools are equipped with computers and 2 out of every 3 school children have a computer at home.

In an online world, the offline law firm will very likely be left behind.

The unknown cost of getting a web site set up and maintaining it, to say nothing for the trouble of actually trying to create one "in house" or deal with the cost of having it done by an "outside" professional, can be a major stumbling block, when your firm first starts out.

The idea of designing a law firm web site can be intimidating, too. Most people do not know "html" or any of that other "code stuff". Like most busy attorneys, you probably do not want to learn it either.

Also, avoid setting up a web site that is just a "billboard" sign. Consumers want useful information that can let them help themselves too, where they can, while still letting them know who you are and what you do. Many professionals say that the best web site is one with "2-way web site benefits", i.e., one which benefits consumers and potential clients, and benefits the firm.

Your first web site can be primitive by comparison, no doubt, but at least it will get you "on the internet map". It is better to have a web site, any web site, than to have none. However, it is just the beginning step. For the solo and the small law firm, a web site is not an option — it is a necessity.

While the cost of creating a web site is a major inhibitor for new-to-the-net attorneys, so is the lack of "mechanical" knowledge on how to do it yourself, even for those who have the time. However, if you want an easy-to-create web site for free, or near free, you can still find it.

Free Web Site Resources Are Still Out There

Many domain name registration sites give you the ability to put up a small, low cost web site yourself using templates and forms that are basically "fill in the blank", such as Register.com and NetworkSolutions.com and GoDaddy.com and many, many others. However, you generally have to buy a domain name first for about \$10 to \$30, more or less.

Hiring a professional to construct and post a professional web site can run into the thousands of dollars and involve huge amounts of time that a busy solo or small firm does not have to spare. Still, a web site can be had for free with a little work and digging on the internet.

Justia.com is one of the best alternatives for free web site help and is remarkably easy to use. Some online research work will undoubtedly turn up others to consider.

The final product of a do-it-yourself site can be as simple or complex as you want, but a complete web site with all its internal links in place, can be created relatively quick and easy. You could also quite easily spend \$4,000 or \$5,000 to have a professional do the same thing from scratch.

You can put a lot of web site content up, to really enhance your internet image, with nothing more than a few hours of own time and work. You can spend as much time as you want and make the finished product look as good as you want. You can even insert a graphic or a photo into your text content. If you aren't careful, it could get to be fun (but don't forget that your first job is to practice law).

After that, add the web site address to your business cards and any other promotional, advertising, or marketing effort you might undertake.

Just remember, the internet is where the marketplace really is, as far as many people are concerned nowadays. The legal profession is more competitive now than ever and the people who would be your new clients are on the internet looking for you. If they don't find you there, they'll find someone else.

In some geographic and practice areas, internet marketing of legal services may not work as well as other areas, we will certainly admit. However, in a large city or in a very competitive marketplace, and especially in a niche practice area, the internet is a valuable necessity for success for the solo practitioner and small law firm. Even in a less urban market, a web site can significantly enlarge your professional appearance in what is already a more regional profession.