

FIRM GUIDANCE

Site Unseen

By Sharon Berman

At a time when Web 2.0 and social media marketing are on everyone's lips, a surprisingly large group of professionals are still far behind the times with the Web's first incarnation. They haven't touched their Web site in years — or worse, they don't have one at all. An outdated Web site is easily spotted because the most recent piece of "news" was posted in 2008 or much earlier.

Quite often, the reasoning is that the Web site really won't make a difference in the firm's business development, or that the important thing is that the firm has a Web site — they did it once and that's it. And, let's not even talk about search engine optimization because there are many firms who are convinced that

the type of client the firm is seeking will not be searching for the service online, so search engine rankings really don't matter. The truth is that in today's world, prospective clients search online for firms in all disciplines and specialties.

Assuming your firm has a site, are you one of the many professionals who acknowledge that it is "embarrassing" or "awful," and that you "have to do something about it"? Does "doing something about it" somehow never seem to reach the top of your priority list? Most professionals are concerned about generating leads and capturing business, but there are still firms that don't seem to think that the Web site has any impact. Simple logic would dictate that if competitors invest time, effort and money in keeping their Web site design and content fresh and up-to-date, they are deriving value from those efforts.

The fact is, having an outdated Web site (or none at all) is simply no longer acceptable for professional service providers. A current site that showcases the firm and its accomplishments is just too important a business development tool to be relegated to the bottom of the priority list. And before you discard search engine optimization, you may want to consider the qualified leads that are slipping through your fingers to someone else's.

Why are so many firms finding it difficult to get around to their Web sites? Let's face

it, developing a Web site or overhauling your current one takes time, money and effort. And to do it right, it takes *your* time, money and effort. While you have to invest the hard dollars for the design, programming, writing and project management of the site, it is your personal commitment that has the highest cost, but can also have the highest return. Delegation to outside agencies notwithstanding, the project needs your brainpower at all stages. Good results from your Web development team depend on your input regarding preferences, choices, points of view and firm tastes. Because much information resides only in your and your colleagues' heads, you will need to provide detailed information about certain specialties, recent successes and other material to be highlighted on the site. Finally, also expect to dedicate some time for review and approval of copy, design and layout.

Another reason professionals don't pay attention to their Web sites is that they view them as just an obligatory online presence. In reality, along with your database or distribution list, the Web site is the very heart of your marketing program. In fact, a key thrust of your marketing is to drive prospective clients or referral sources to your website where they are converted to prospects who contact the firm. Thus, if you have a Web site you don't want people to see, it sabotages your entire marketing plan.

Here's an example. Let's say you want to take advantage of the cost-efficiency of communicating through e-mail with current, former and prospective clients, referral sources and influencers. Perhaps you would like to distribute an e-print (electronic reprint) of a recent article you authored, or let the world know about a recent success. While you can simply e-mail that information, it will be much less effective without a current Web site. Why? The key aspect of distributing the information is to attract the recipients to your website so they can learn more about the firm and your expertise. Whether or not you want them to, many readers of your communication will visit your Web site. Don't waste those contacts by showing them a site you haven't touched in years!

You can track a lot of information about

who visits your site — whether they came in through a search engine, what page they first entered on, how long they spent on the site, etc., but there's a key statistic you can't track. That's the number of prospective clients who have visited your site, looked at your competitors' sites, and then called another firm because they were unimpressed or deterred by your online presence. Are you losing business because of your Web site?

Sometimes firms don't update their Web sites because they are daunted by the prospect of tearing it up and starting over. Actually, immediate major construction may be unnecessary. It may be possible to work with what you already have — updating copy, adding navigation buttons, posting new content or introducing a news page where you can tout recent successes. Some sites are more difficult to update than others because of the way they were originally programmed, but start by exploring the short-term options inherent in your current site. When the time comes, in the near future, to revamp the site completely, that job will be easier with content that has already been cleaned up and refreshed. If you do need to start from square one, make sure you commit to a deadline for completion, and consider updating your current site simultaneously to the extent possible.

Today's online world is one of linking and leveraging where nothing stands alone. For instance, let's say that you appear on a "Top 10" list in your specialty. Updating your bio on the Web site with that information is a step in the right direction. But if it stops there because your colleagues are embarrassed by the Web site, you are missing opportunities to enhance and reinforce the name recognition today's web world offers. To get the most out of the opportunity, you might develop a press release about the ranking and post it on your home page news. Further, you should mention the honor in your firm's e-mail distribution — a client alert or newsletter. Perhaps a firm member would Tweet about it, post something about it on LinkedIn or mention it in the firm's practice area blog. All of those steps are designed to raise people's curiosity enough to want to learn more. Without a Web site of which you can be proud, it's a dead-end road.



Search engine optimization has become an essential component of many firms' marketing programs across a broad range of practice areas, and will only continue to increase in importance. Yes, you will need to sort through a certain amount of chaff in the responses you get, but chances are you'll find some worthwhile leads, which more than make up for the others. Obviously, if your site is not fit to convert leads into prospects, optimization is a waste.

So what steps should you take right now? Commit to making your Web site one that showcases the firm's expertise and successes. Set a hard deadline to get it done. Identify who wants to be involved in the legwork — attorneys, paralegals, administration. Who among them will be the marketing "champion" who will nip at the heels of others to gather the materials needed?

For the highly professional product you need, work with a professional team, which can include a designer (who designs the look and layout of the site), a programmer (who programs the site following the designer's lead), a writer and a project manager who coordinates the entire effort. Ideally, these people should be a team so you can avoid the extra logistics of dealing with each party individually. Identify a point of

contact in the firm who will liaise with your outside Web team. While the technical deployment of the website may be in the purview of your IT department, its design and messaging should not be.

Lastly, create a budget to get your site up and running. Don't forget to allow for elements such as original headshots and other photos and any original artwork that might be needed.

Be prepared for the fact that once your Web site is updated or totally redone, that's it needs time and attention. Someone needs to be the point person for making sure it's kept up-to-date.

There's simply no way around the fact that bringing your Web site up to the present has to be an absolute priority. This investment of time, effort and money is just that — an investment with the goal of yielding a high return. The costs of not doing it are the opportunities you are missing and the business you are losing because others are passing you by.

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Give Summer Associates Pro Bono Work to Tackle

By Brent D. Sokol, Andrei Iancu and Kara Backus

Perhaps a lawyer's greatest joy comes from knowing that she has helped a client who understands and appreciates the help. If the client expresses, in some palpable manner, a heart-felt thanks to the lawyer, it probably doesn't get any better than that. But lawyers most often experience the law's arguably greatest content later in their careers, once they have forged direct relationships with the people and organizations they choose to serve. For many, the fulfillment comes too late.

These days, large firms understand the importance of providing fulfilling client experiences early in a lawyer's career. In fact, it is never too early to start. Summer is no exception.

It used to be rare for summer associates to meet a client, let alone serve a client who understood and appreciated their work. Nearly 20 years ago, a summer associate position meant a treadmill of memoranda and research coupled with social events involving the firm's lawyers. Client contact was not often part of the mix.

Now, in addition to contact with institutional clients, firms provide pro bono opportunities that offer direct and powerful training for summer associates. Through direct responsibility, summer associates learn how they can beneficially affect people's lives, take "ownership" of a client and develop valuable skill sets in the process. Pro bono work has the power to inspire summer associates and the lawyers around them and connect them to the community. Fortunately, you don't have to look far for these kinds of opportunities in Los Angeles.

Pro bono opportunities are as varied as the people and institutions who need legal help. In Los Angeles, through Public Counsel, the world's largest public interest law firm, summer associates can meet face-to-face with clients that are burdened with imminent, personal legal challenges. The legal issues can vary from mortgage scams, to landlord-tenant challenges, to domestic issues. In each case, summer associates have the opportunity to interview clients, gather facts and draft and file legal documents, often for the first time in their careers.

Pro bono work for nonprofit social institutions also provides summer associates with a fulfilling, direct lawyering experience. Social institutions are often concerned with legal issues that impact the local community or society as a whole.

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And they often lack the resources to vigorously take on all the issues they are chartered to address. By teaming up with law firm summer programs, these institutions get needed help on legal issues. In exchange, the summer associates have an even more fulfilling experience and build ties to the community. For example, summer associates may draft a paper or brief on legal issues that the institution will use to form its policy positions, promote legislation, or prepare amicus briefs. The topics are challenging and complex. The summer associates may develop relationships that will keep them active in the local community, or at least get them out of the office.

In Los Angeles, many firms (14 this year) asked a couple of their summer associates to participate in the annual Maxwell E. Greenberg Summer Associate Research Program sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League. Each summer the ADL offers dozens of legal topics from its list of social concerns. Firms choose from a variety of topics according to their own interests and level of program participation. Typically, an ADL issue is borne of a specific social incident, often involving bigotry or unlawful discrimination. Often the issue will pit two constitutional heavyweights against one another, such as the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion. In many cases, the issues play out across a web of federal, state and municipal

law, and summer associates must consider constitutional, statutory and regulatory mandates. Importantly, the summer associates are given full responsibility for their work product, which may find its way into ADL position papers or amicus briefs.

This year, as in each of the past 11 years, the Greenberg program kicks off with a city-wide meeting where summer associates from participating firms meet representatives from the ADL and each other. From there, they are asked to help to draft a legal analysis on the ADL topic selected by their firm. Summer associates then shape their own research plan and engage in in-depth research and analysis. Finally, the summer associates prepare comprehensive written work product on the topic.

This type of pro bono project gives summer associates a sense of how it feels to address a complex legal issue for a corporate or institutional client. Though the summer associates are encouraged to seek input from the ADL staff, firm attorneys or law professors who lend their time to the program, the summer associates themselves are responsible for the advice and analysis. Like a good client, the ADL expresses its gratitude. At the end of the summer, the ADL recognizes each summer associate and firm for their project during a city-wide awards reception, which features a speech by a prominent jurist.

Institutions like Public Counsel and the ADL offer summer associates opportunities for direct contact with someone, besides their employer, who needs their help. This unique feature enhances their skill sets. Both programs let summer associates formulate a legal strategy and provide a hands-on experience. Public Counsel cases move relatively quickly, so it is possible to see the entire life of a case or project in a short time period. Summer associates also often work in teams with other summer associates, which allows them to take on an early leadership role.

By the same token, ADL projects challenge the creativity of the summer associates, who must formulate advice in an area where no one, not even the ADL, knows the best path. So the experience and exposure helps build legal skills and confidence in young lawyers, empowers them and prepares them to succeed when the opportunity arises to take

on significant responsibility for a paying client.

Of course, the issues differ from the steady fare of large firm associates. The ADL projects, for example, give summer associates the opportunity to work on current civil rights questions, from the appropriateness of public surveillance, to the regulation of religious garb in a public school, to same-sex marriage — questions that do not often come up in a corporate environment. But the ability to vary the law firm diet is precisely what gives pro bono programs their power to motivate and stimulate. Besides, the programs develop skills common to good lawyering: leadership, responsibility, effective client communication, strategic thinking and, ultimately, understanding and exceeding the expectations of someone who is counting on you. This serves to both enrich the summer associate's experience and to set them on the right path as young lawyers.

On a more personal level, through their pro bono work, summer associates are exposed to various organizations throughout the city. As they build their practices, they are likely to find one organization that especially piques their interest or is a unique fit for their skill set. Some may come to appreciate that it is possible to balance the separate rewards of working in a corporate firm and being involved in the community. The pro bono work experience has the potential to make better, stronger, happier lawyers who are more engaged in the community and more likely to continue to serve it. It is in everyone's interest, including law firms, to ensure that our offices and communities are filled with engaged and skilled lawyers who find fulfillment and balance in their lives.

In the end, to provide summer associates with a direct lawyering experience reinforces a fundamental precept of law — it is a service business. That is a lesson that it is never too early to learn — even over the course of a student's summer.

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