

# Midyear Legal Checklist: Making an Impact Online

BY MIKE ANDROVETT

With midyear quickly approaching, many law firms are taking stock of their 2011 business development and marketing strategies while looking for the tools that will keep their practices on top during the second half of the year.

It should come as no surprise that the Internet represents one of the quickest and most-efficient means for proving what sets your firm apart. From car wreck victims to corporate general counsel, more and more clients and potential clients are using the Internet to vet their legal counsel and compare their existing lawyers to the competition.

Ten years ago, a robust Internet presence meant that your law firm had a website. Today, law firm websites are as ubiquitous as telephones, and a robust Internet presence includes such online tools as search engine optimization (SEO), LinkedIn, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

# **Keep Your Site Current**

Since your website represents the first resource many potential clients will rely on when gathering information about your firm, it is imperative to include upto-date information and clear evidence of your professional capabilities. Website biographies are a good place to start. Keeping the information current is a must. Prospective clients might be dismayed if the latest news on your biography is a speaking engagement from 2004. By the same token, they'll be impressed if they can read about a case you successfully handled just weeks ago.

Many lawyers think they are too busy to consistently update their website biographies, but the truth is that little time or effort is required to keep your bio updated with new information. Take an hour each month to review and update your online bio. Remove the "old" listings and insert new matters. Update your photo so visitors to your site know what you look like today, rather than when you were fresh out of law school. You'll be amazed at the feedback from people you never knew were researching you online.

Hand-in-hand with keeping online biographies current is making sure your website includes timely evidence of your professional capabilities and news about your legal successes. Prospective clients are not reviewing courthouse records to see if your firm is able to handle their legal problems, which is why it is so important for news about your professional accomplishments to be available online.

If your firm has won a big trial, if one of your partners has been honored by a professional organization, if a significant partner has joined your ranks, then this news should be prominently posted on your website. One caveat: When reporting on case victories, firms should closely consult State Bar advertising rules in order to avoid publishing information in a manner that's prohibited.

# **Protect and Improve Your Site**

In addition to website content, there are several "behind-the-scenes" tools that can protect your site and improve the likelihood that Internet users will find your firm. One simple tactic for protecting against infringement is to make sure your website copyright is updated. During the past couple years, some lawyers and firms have created "mirror" websites that look exactly like websites that were purchased and are being maintained by other law firms. The offending firms simply remove the original logos and staff biographies and replace them with their own. Although updating your copyright may not prevent your site from being "mirrored," it does provide a valuable piece of legal proof against those online interlopers that are using your layout and content.

Much like a tree falling in the forest, your website will go unnoticed if Internet users cannot find you in search engines. Sure, the people who know you and your firm will be able to locate you online, but what about the prospective clients who have no idea that you even exist?

Knowing the terms that people use when searching for legal help is one of the most important ways to keep your website prominent in today's online community. Making sure your website contains specific search terms is part of what's called search engine optimization (SEO), and it's one of the ways to get your firm noticed on the Web.

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Search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, and Bing all rely on complicated algorithms to rank websites based on the search terms that are entered. These terms are also called "keywords," and the likelihood of you appearing in search results is directly related to whether your website contains these keywords, along with other measures.

For example, potential clients looking for help with an age discrimination lawsuit might search with "I was fired because of my age," instead of using the search term "age discrimination lawsuit." If your website includes the specific phrase, then the likelihood increases that you will appear high in the search engine results. SEO has become a cottage industry among web development companies, particularly those offering services to law firms. Aside from these companies, there are many free tools online that can help you identify the keywords that best suit your firm and your practice.

## Social Media Is Your Friend

In addition to making sure your website content is up to date and contains the keywords that will get you noticed, it is becoming increasingly important for law firms to establish and maintain a presence in social media. Millions of people rely on social media as their portal to the online world. Some use Twitter as a source for world news, others trust Facebook to organize their social calendars, while others turn to LinkedIn for information about their business peers.

Based on the large number of available social media outlets, most law firms are best served by targeting one or two before jumping into deep waters. Although there are distinct differences in social media platforms, firms can easily adapt content across various social media to make sure their message reaches the widest audience.

Dismissing social media as frivolous or "something the kids are doing" is the equivalent of banning telephones at your firm based on the notion that writing letters works just fine. It is vitally important that you begin building your firm's social media presence today because it has already become a key

means of communication. While the effort is a little more nuanced than setting up a website, you'll find that social media can bring new audiences to your firm and stimulate your practice in ways you may have never imagined.

Marketing your firm in order to develop new business and maintain the confidence of your existing clients is a year-round effort that is made much easier by making sure your online identity reflects the same effort and passion you bring to your docket. The beauty is that it is never too late to start. Just a few keystrokes and simple clicks of the mouse, and you're on your way.



### MIKE ANDROVETT

is the president and CEO of Androvett Legal Media & Marketing, which has offices in Dallas and Houston.

