

A well-designed and informative web site is vital to a law firm's success. Delia Venables explains how to set one up and what special features it should include

Lawyers may love or loathe the technological advances that have made their working practices easier, but at the same time made them that much more accessible to clients who have come to expect instant responses. One thing is certain – clients these days take for granted that their law firms will have embraced technology enough to have their own Web sites. So how should solicitors go about setting up or improving their sites?

Regional law firm Shoosmiths was recently considered to have the best site of the UK's 50 fastest-growing law firms, according to research by Web site and on-line business applications company Intendance (see [2005] Gazette, 5 May, 9). Not all sites need to be that sophisticated, but clients expect to be able to find at least the basic details about a firm of solicitors on-line – information on partners, staff, types of work, office locations, contact details and so on.

A site that just provides this type of information is often called a 'brochure site'. The easiest way to obtain one of these is to use one of the template services, notably from Legal & Financial, or Lawyer HomePages, which is part of the LawyerLocator directory, now owned by legal publisher LexisNexis. A firm can choose from a range of styles of site and then provide its own information, logos and colours. The Web services company will then set up the site and host it.

Sites like this will typically cost £300 to £500 to set up, with a monthly maintenance cost of £50 to £100, and a minimum contract of a year. The cost usually includes updates and subsequent changes to the information.

Another approach for small firms is to make use of local contacts and companies. A local Web site consultancy can probably build a site for around £1,000. However, the disadvantage of using a local firm is that it will probably not have access to the add-on goodies – for example, conveyancing quotations or case tracking, which would be available from companies specialising in the legal market.

Firms that already have a well-designed site can usually add additional features. One company that specialises in working with existing sites is Samson Consulting. Director Nick Jervis says: 'If the design is sound, and matches the firm's corporate identity, we do not advise changing the site for the sake of it. We can take clients who have existing Web sites and transfer them on to our professionally managed Web site service. For a set monthly sum of £500, we add specially designed content to the site every month, ensuring that it complies with accessibility rules and that it is consistent with the rest of the site. We also optimise the content so as to improve search engine ratings and suggest new features.'

However, it is often not cost effective to try to develop an existing site. The site may look out of date from a design perspective or it may be hard to update. It will also probably not use the latest techniques to enable the site to be used in different ways for viewers with different access problems.

In most cases, firms with an out-dated site will need to start again. So where is the best place to go for a new site? A firm's existing software supplier should be the first port of call. The advantage of the existing supplier is that it can integrate the site with software that the firm is already running, such as case management or internal intranets; this can be a big advantage. Otherwise, Web services companies that provide services to lawyers are listed on the Venables Web site (see list below) with examples of their work. This provides information on all the main suppliers of Web design services to lawyers and also shows examples of their work.

One service that firms can offer on their sites is on-line case tracking, which enables clients to log on and find out the status of their case. This is a good selling point to attract Internet-savvy clients, and can have the added bonus of reducing the number of telephone calls both in and out of the firm.

Managing the case-tracking process on-line can be complicated, and security is a major issue. But it is possible for firms to use a service provided by someone else – for example, their own legal software suppliers or specialist conveyancing systems – to do the hard bit. The client can move seamlessly from the law firm's site to the 'other' site using the password and log-on details provided by the firm. The current state of the firm's cases is then uploaded to the other site on a regular basis.

Many of the main legal suppliers have a special interest in case management software and can provide this sort of service, as well as specialist conveyancing software companies including Easyconvey and conveyancelink.

Solicitor Richard Arney, a consultant at legal IT specialist Briefclick, warns that for on-line case tracking to work, it must be updated automatically. He says: 'These systems are only of benefit if you can update them automatically, either via your case management system or via macros, for example from Microsoft Word. Otherwise, the time taken for the solicitor to log in, find and update cases is just another burden. Anyone who has tried to manually update LMS [Legal Marketing Services] using the STARS [Solicitor Tracking and Reporting System] site or the Halifax's Simply Conveyancing will know how time-consuming this can be – but both of these now provide a gateway to upload and download instructions electronically.'

Intranets are another example of how a firm can make full use of its site. An intranet can be very simple, with just a few pages of a firm's information available internally, or a serious repository of the firm's databank.

David Gilroy, joint managing director of consultancy Conscious Solutions, says it is possible to buy in excellent software to handle all the hard work of setting up an intranet. He says: 'Products such as Intranet Dashboard provide 34 applications out-of-the-box for a very low cost – around £400 per administrative user – and one person can generally administer the whole system for a firm of up to, say, 50 staff. The product allows them to implement a feature-rich, tailored intranet application in just a few days.'

Another supplier providing pre-defined structures for intranets is Eclipse Legal, which offers a 'boxed intranet'. This provides access to centralised practice news, discussion forums, staff polls, manuals, legal documentation and practice-wide diaries. It also enables support requests to be logged to the in-house IT department.

Once the basic intranet is set up, it is also possible to provide client access to particular sections. Client access to specialised information is becoming an important development area for many firms.

Any firm that wishes to put up a large amount of information on its Web site, keep it up-to-date and maintain a coherent style, will need content management software. This enables non-IT people to prepare information for the site, which is then checked by an editor. Once the new material is approved, the software then converts the text, which is usually provided in Microsoft Word format, into html, the special language used to build Web sites. It then loads up the site accordingly. Web service companies that specialise in this type of software include ActiveLawyer, **emis intellectual technology**, Enstar, and Nasstar.

Toby Page, design consultant at Emis, says: 'Content administration [software] is becoming very popular, giving control to the practice for managing content on the Web site. This can be as simple as amending staff details or adding press releases, but can also extend to a full CMS (content management system) allowing the whole site to be modified on-line. Prices start at around £300 for basic administration facilities, to over £2,000 for a full bespoke CMS.'

A few years ago, the sale of legal services over the Internet was thought to be the future of legal Web sites. But in fact few medium-sized or smaller firms are doing this. It has proved to be difficult to give advice that can be relied on without actually seeing the client – and money laundering requirements have made this situation even more difficult.

In addition, clients expect on-line services to be extremely cheap and there seems to be little profit in services of this kind. A successful on-line business runs of undercutting other areas of the business that are still providing services in the 'normal' way.

Most of the firms that do sell services on-line tend to be fiercely individual and determined, including east London firm Kaye Tesler, Norwich-based Tessa Shepperson with Landlord Law, Briffa in north London and Nottinghamshire practice Fidler & Pepper. It is hard to imagine how other firms could easily emulate these pioneers.

Perhaps the final nail in the coffin of selling simple legal services and documents on-line is that other non-solicitor providers have moved into the market – such as Tesco law, Divorce On-line, Compact law – and made the prospect of competing in this area even less attractive.

Some of the very large law firms offer services on-line. Examples include magic circle firm Linklaters, with Blue Flag Regulatory, which offers a series of financial institution modules for each country and region by reference to a range of different activities, and Clifford Chance's NextLaw, which provides a series of guides suitable for multinational organisations assessing their relevant legal obligations and potential exposure to regulatory risk. National firm Pinsent Masons offers a site for new media companies called OUT-LAW, while City firm Simmons & Simmons has a site for commercial firms called elexica.

One thing to bear in mind is the need to make Web sites accessible to the disabled, according to current legislation. There are various standards and protocols available on the Web to assist in this, but these can be confusing and in no way definitive.

The vast majority of solicitors' sites are not accessible by any reasonable definition, and there could be trouble soon. As Mr Jervis says: 'It is essential that solicitors' sites should be built to comply with the accessibility requirements. If any group of businesses is likely to be targeted for having non-DDA [Disability Discrimination Act 1995] compliant Web sites, we believe solicitors will be high on the list, as they have been recently with the Information Commissioner.'

Then there is the challenge of ensuring that potential clients will be able to find a firm's site, for example if they type 'divorce Birmingham uk' into Google or Yahoo. There are techniques to improve a firm's chances using key words in various ways, and all worthwhile site developers will assist in this, though some of the methods can be dubious.

One technique is to use a rival's name in the 'meta tags', which are read by the search engines, and fill blank space with keywords in transparent text. That means they cannot be seen by the viewer, but the Web 'robots' will find the words.

Other dubious methods include 'link swaps' whereby other sites suggest to a firm that they should have mutual links; at one time the search engines used the number of links to a site as a measure of its importance, but most search engines are too clever to be fooled for long.

Another option is to pay money to the search engines to bring the site up to the top of the list – usually in a 'sponsored link' area at the right-hand side. But while a good search engine rating may be advantageous, the most important thing is ensure that the firm's site is useful for clients, and a site the firm can be proud of.

Delia Venables is an independent computer consultant for solicitors and she also maintains one of the principal independent legal sites for lawyers, <http://www.venables.co.uk/>

Web site support

www.legal-financial.co.uk

<http://www.websitesforlawfirms.co.uk/>

www.samsonconsulting.co.uk

www.venables.co.uk/services.htm

www.easyconvey.com

<http://www.conveyancelink.com/>

www.conscious.co.uk

www.eclipselegal.co.uk

<http://www.activelawyer.com/>

www.emisit.com

www.enstar.net

www.nasstar.com