

Site Unseen: Why Revising Your Website Should Be A Priority

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 website in years – or worse, they don't have one at all. An outdated website is easily spotted because the most recent piece of "news" was posted in 2008 or much earlier.

Quite often, the reasoning is that the website really won't make a difference in the firm's business development, or that the important thing is that the firm has a website – they did it once and that's it. And, let's not even talk about search engine optimization (SEO) 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 website has any impact. Simple logic would dictate that if competitors invest time, effort and money in keeping their website design and content fresh and up-to-date, they are deriving value from those efforts.



The fact is, having an outdated website (or none at all) is simply no longer acceptable for professional service providers.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 websites? Let's face it, developing a website 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 websites is that they view them as just an obligatory online presence. In reality, along with your database or distribution list, the website 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 website 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 email 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 email that information, it will be much less effective without a current website. Why? The key aspect of distributing the information is to attract the recipients to your

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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 website. 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 website?

Sometimes firms don't update their websites 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 website with that information is a step in the right direction. But if it stops there because your colleagues are embarrassed by the website, 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 email 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 website 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 website 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 website 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 website 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. ■