



## 13 TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR WEB SITE

Ellen Freedman, CLM  
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I recently published an article entitled “Get Mr. Spock Off Your Web Site!” and the response from readers was wonderful. I have since gotten requests from many firms to review their web site and tell them how “awful” it really is. Most were actually fairly decent, but almost all called for improvement. As I went along I made a mental note of the most frequent problems I encountered, with the idea that eventually I would publish the list. So here we go.

1. This first tip is a repeat of something mentioned in my last article, as well as the article referenced above, but it’s important enough to bear repeating. You want to make it as easy as possible for people to do business with your firm, and that ease of experience should begin when they first land on your web site. Don’t make them work hard to find what they want. If they’re savvy enough to go to the area of practice that’s relevant, make sure there are links on there to the lawyers, or at least the partners, who practice in that area. Make it easy for them to identify who to call.

For business clients it often becomes more difficult to determine the appropriate area of practice. That’s because many industries require a multi-faceted approach. For that reason, you should also present your practice areas by industry solution. For example: Health Care; Nonprofit; Energy; Hospitality; Telecommunications and so forth.

2. Be findable. Make sure your search engine optimization (SEO) has been properly done organically so as to allow search engines to properly pinpoint your firm. Some of the most valuable real estate on your web site consists of the words which make up the HTML title of each page. When I visit sites I am frequently amazed that the home page title is, simply, “home.” In fact, often each page title is simply wasted. What should be there? Something like “business and estate planning lawyers serving Montgomery, Bucks, Chester, Berks and Philadelphia counties in northeast Pennsylvania.”

Also keep in mind that there are a number of free listing services where you can include your firm. Each placement can increase your chance of placing higher up in search results. Just remember to record each and every listing you've made. That way if you move or change telephone numbers, you won't have outdated information "out there" confusing people.

3. Keep it visually neat. Too many pages I visit appear too crowded. There is not enough white space. Menus are inconveniently located, and often take up too much real estate on the screen. And I swear, if I visit one more site with that scale of justice in the top left corner, my head will explode!

One pet peeve I have—and I just visited a major national law firm site which suffers from this big time—are fluctuating menus which keep moving and changing as one hovers the mouse over it. Now there's nothing wrong with the typical "window shade" menus which "pull down" as one clicks on the name. But we're talking about menu items that fluctuate so rapidly—expanding and contracting—without so much more than a casual pass-over with the mouse, that it makes it virtually impossible to actually click on what one wants.

4. Don't make the fonts too small in your attempt to keep everything on one screen. Keep in mind that not everyone will be able to visit your web site with a big monitor in front of them. In fact, if you look at the statistics, you'll see that more and more people are accessing content from netbooks and smartphones. But even if they're as fortunate as I am, with two 22" monitors in front of me, you should know that I still struggle to actually read the copy on many sites. Yes, I *can* use CTRL and the + sign to enlarge the screen, but then I wind up scrolling back and forth, which is annoying and wastes time.
5. Speaking of netbooks and smartphones, be sure to have a mobile-friendly version of your web site. I can't begin to tell you how many sites I visit, find too difficult to navigate from my iPhone or iPad, and leave within a minute or two. I'm typical in that respect.

The other day I was looking to buy a new TV. While I was at lunch, I decided to check out the 4 major big box stores in my immediate vicinity on my iPhone. One big box store was so difficult to navigate, that I just gave up, despite having a discount coupon in my car. Another greeted me



with a home page which was definitely built for mobile access. All I had on the front page were active links for each product area. Each successive page I listed had easy links to navigate, and not a whole lot of extraneous information unless I called for it. And when I did, it was easy to navigate back. Everything loaded quickly, and I got to the information I wanted lickety-split. I placed my order right from the phone, for pick-up at the store following lunch.

6. Keep the information on your site current. My goodness, you have no idea how many web sites out there are out of date. Old addresses. Offices remaining which are long closed. Bios of lawyers no longer at the firm. New lawyers whose bios aren't up, or don't have photos yet, or are not consistent in layout with all the other bios. Firm "news" which is so old, there is nothing newsworthy about it.

Another pet peeve of mine concerns the endless listing of articles at the end of some bios which are *not* live links to copies of the articles. It is definitely worthwhile getting reprint permission, and having a place for all the articles on your web site. Remember that including all your articles will increase the likelihood that a search will include your firm in the results.

7. Keep your links up to date. Every few months someone should go through your site and test your links to make sure they all work. That includes links internal to your site—one page to another— as well as links to locations outside of your site.
8. Avoid legalese. Everything you write— even for your so-called sophisticated clients— should be in plain English. You can still look knowledgeable when writing in plain English, and you don't risk losing potential clients who might feel they will have a communication problem just trying to get a simple answer they can understand.
9. Remember to think like the client. Always. What information are they looking for when they get on the internet looking for your type of service? What words will they use? What questions will they have? Try to anticipate as much as you can, and create your site content accordingly.
10. Consider using video. Remember, you're dealing with the TV generation. Keep your videos short — one to three minutes — and use them to address FAQ, talk about your firm, and otherwise engage your audience. Although professionally produced videos are always best, they can be

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(215) 628-9422



pricey. With today's great quality cameras, most of which now capture HD video, and a tripod, it's not hard to make your own video. If you're in a small town practice, the fact that it's more obviously homemade—assuming you've done a decent job—will make it all the more engaging.

Keep in mind that video doesn't replace text, but it's great to offer it as an alternative. Some people will prefer to play the video rather than read the text.

11. Keep unnecessary pictures, and especially flash media, off your website home page unless they are essential. You want your site to load as quickly as possible for visitors, so avoid anything that interferes with that. Video isn't something which will slow down loading, unless and until it's selected by a visitor. If they do so, they know there will be a delay while it downloads. On the other hand, nothing is more frustrating than visiting a web site and watching the information bar on the bottom inform you that you are waiting for 15 more photos to download before you can even begin to look for the information you want.
12. Keep the need to use the scroll bar to navigate off the screen to a minimum. Unless we're talking about a biography, most of what runs off the screen can just as well be put on a separate page with links on the originating page. It will be neater, and probably appear better organized.
13. This last tip is for your firm's protection. If you have a contact page where people can send you email, you want to make sure that your disclaimer is not something they can miss. Having a small link at the bottom of the page, or even on the bottom of every page, isn't enough. They may never click on it, and may wind up sending you information you don't want to receive.

There are two ways to make sure your contact page doesn't work against you. First, you can have the relevant part of your disclaimer printed boldly on the contact page, just above where they fill in their information and hit send. What's relevant? First, that there is no client/attorney relationship established by their communication, and unless and until an engagement agreement is signed, none will exist. Second, there is no confidentiality privilege, and they should not send sensitive information until such time as a true attorney/client relationship is established.

Another way to accomplish this is to have a mandatory checkbox



acknowledging that they have read your disclaimer, right next to the “Send” button. The word disclaimer would be a live link to your disclaimer. Without checking the box, the information on the contact form cannot be sent.

I came across this recently on a solo attorney’s web site, and was very impressed with the simplicity, and how clean it made the contact form appear. Plus, it affirmatively guarantees that any email received means that the prospect has acknowledged (even if they haven’t actually done it) their requirement to read the disclaimer.

I hope that you’ve found at least one or two tips in here you can put to work on your firm’s site. As I conclude this article, I smile knowing that at least a few of you who read this article will actually believe that one or more of these tips were created because of what I saw on *your* site. I know, because I get emails that start out with, “I know I’m probably being paranoid, but I can’t help but feel that your point #n was because of something you saw on my site. Can you take a look and tell me what else needs fixing?”

The truth be told, I see these things so often, in some combination, that there probably is at least one which needs addressing on your site. But get in line, because you’re not alone. As I said in my last article, there’s always room for improvement. Need another set of eyes to look your site over and give some practical suggestions? I’m here to help. Your dues dollars at work!

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