

# The Federal Lawyer In Cyberia

MICHAEL J. TONSING

## Creating or Rethinking Your Firm's Web Presence

*This "best of" column first appeared in the July 2005 issue of The Federal Lawyer.*

Five years ago, articles on why a law firm needs a Web site were everywhere. That debate is over. All lawyers now know that they or their firms should have a Web presence.

In larger law firms, Web sites are created by staff who have been brought on board, at least in part, to create and maintain the firm's Web presence. In smaller firms, no such resource exists. Therefore, this month's column—on Web site planning, creation, and promotion—is primarily directed at the smaller firms and the sole practitioners. However, I'd like to think that there are enough ideas here to warrant at least a serious scan by all readers.



### Web Site Philosophies

In the rush to stake a claim in cyberia, many early claimants reminded me of lawyers who rushed to hire paralegals back when that role was first under development in the 1970s. I remember sitting across the table at a local bar association luncheon from a guy who had hired a paralegal, because he had read that the best firms were doing so, but he confessed that he was all but clueless as to what his new hire could do for him.

Similarly, many firms created Web sites a few years ago, because all the best firms were doing so. These newcomers were also clueless. Their sites lacked a focus—a purpose. Just as that paralegal probably sat idle, so too (I strongly suspect) these firms' Web sites generated almost no business.

One of philosopher Yogi Berra's most famous sayings is, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it!" But what was successful as a life philosophy for an unassuming but extremely talented Yankee catcher is not likely to succeed as a business philosophy for a law firm. Not these days. Today it is crucial for a law firm to pick a "fork" that leads in a direction the firm has chosen to go, especially in light of the fact that other firms are ramping up second- and third-generation sites as this column is written—sites that will probably take them where they want to go.

### Web Site Planning

Many vendors pitch Web site development servic-



es. Many suggest that they can do it all for you. That approach may be tempting; however, a coherent Web presence—one that integrates well with your firm's overall approach to communicating with present and future clients—will almost certainly require your active involvement. Before you choose the color scheme for your site, you should have a plan.

One of the best available sources for helping a novice develop such a plan is a book by Kim M. Bayne, the host of the syndicated radio program, "The Cyber Media Show," heard weekly on traditional public radio (and also streaming on the Web). She's a former high-tech marketing communications executive, and she knows her stuff.

The second edition of her very successful book, *The Internet Marketing Plan*, is not specifically directed toward law firms. Nor does it focus on very small businesses. The book—along with the accompanying CD-ROM—contains templates, spreadsheets, fill-in outlines, and Web site bookmarks—all of which make it a fine starting point for a lawyer who has little or no background in marketing or Web site design but who wants to do more than take any fork in the road. The book walks the reader through the creation and implementation of an Internet marketing plan and suggests ways to measure the results achieved. One of the things I like best about the book is that it views the Internet marketing plan as only one facet of an

overall marketing plan.

Bayne's book is sometimes criticized as being too basic. Frankly, that's not a problem for me, and I suspect it is not for most of my readers. However, those who are ready for a more advanced text (especially from the marketing perspective) might want to look at Brad Kleindl's *Strategic Electronic Marketing*. In his book's 300 or so pages, he uses a standard approach of business school professors: the author employs case studies to highlight his points. Kleindl's book focuses on companies that are far larger than even the largest law firms—companies like Dell Computer, Amazon.com, AT&T, and many more. But most of the lessons he illustrates in his book apply with nearly equal force to small law firms with small Web sites.

Once you've developed a plan, you can either turn the technical design phase over to others or create the Web site yourself. Actually, I recommend that you do both. Unless you really want to learn the "art" and science of Web site creation, this would be a perfect time to invite others to help. But, unless the site's content will be wholly the responsibility of others, it would be wise to keep your hands on both oars for a while longer, even when others may start rowing with you during this next phase.

### Web Site Creation

As for me, I chose to involve others. I was not so much concerned that I could not build a site as I was with whether I could justify the time necessary to construct one that I could be proud of. I also felt that building the site was only half the battle; having the site accessible to potential clients via proper search engine placement (placement has to do with the position you are given on a search engine when you and other sites are listed as "hits" on someone's search) was just as important. "If you build it, they will come" may be true of small ballparks in the Midwest, but it is not true of legal Web sites. Again, placement is something I believe I could master, but I'd rather practice law.

For a host of reasons, but primarily to ensure both appropriate design and proper placement, I chose to go with a service called West FirmSite, which enabled me to work directly (by phone) with a Web site designer who, because she designs only law firm sites, instantly grasped my needs when I shared them with her. I am pleased with the resulting site. Though I am actively engaged in the never-ending task of tweaking the site, it has already become an invaluable part of my overall marketing plan.

FirmSites are not inexpensive. If your plan calls for something less costly, if you do not want to do the design work all by yourself, and if placement is not a major issue, you should consider using a service that provides templates that you can choose, modify, and adopt. (You should also consider them if you want to hire a separate service to deal with placement issues, and there are many such services out there.)

I have recently become acquainted with the folks at one such outfit, LawConnects.com, located in Danville, Calif. Their approach is a very cost-effective solution for small law firms and sole practitioners looking for an alternative. As stated quite succinctly on the service's own site, "Our innovative Lawyer Website building tool gives anyone who can type the ability to create and maintain a professional grade attorney website that can impress current clients and generate new business."

LawConnects.com can create a professional, customized law firm Web site of from three to 30 pages in an hour with you over the Internet, if you have your content ready. The visuals can be either stock photos from the site builders' "legal photo gallery" or digitized photos that you supply. And LawConnects.com can provide the service for about \$300 a year.

LawConnects.com indicates that, unlike those of many other site builders, their Web sites are automatically submitted to major search engines on a regular basis. Search optimization guides are included in the basic subscription price, as are online traffic builder and promotion guides. They suggest that frugal lawyers can gain good search engine placement on their own and thus save a substantial consulting fee. On the other hand, one could use a chunk of what he or she has saved by choosing LawConnects.com in the first place on a third-party vendor in order to gain optimal search engine placement and still be ahead of the higher-priced alternatives in terms of cost.

### Conclusion

I plan to return to this general topic again in future issues. But, for now, I hope that those of you who have come to a fork in the road and have chosen to take *neither* fork are at least realizing that you are not moving forward when others around you are doing so. Choose a path that leads your firm to a well-designed Web site that is appropriate to your firm's goals and that also meets current and prospective clients' needs. Then, as Yogi Berra would say, "Take it!" See you again next time in cyberia! **TFL**

---

*Michael J. Tonsing practices law in San Francisco. He is a member of the FBA editorial board and serves on the Executive Committee of the Law Practice Management and Technology Section of the State Bar of California. He also mentors less experienced litigators by serving as a "second chair" to their trials. See [www.YourSecondChair.com](http://www.YourSecondChair.com). He can be reached at [mtonsing@lawyer.com](mailto:mtonsing@lawyer.com).*