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My Nephew Built Our Website (and the Other Deadly Sins of Law Firm Web Development)

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There are two undisputable truths in this world: One, every business needs a website and two, everybody has, or knows of, a nephew. These absolutes, when forced to coexist, often lead firms down a slippery slope of lost opportunity and diminishing returns on their marketing investment. The mixture of nepotism and cost-saving measures is but one of the many pitfalls that firms can find themselves in when embarking upon the development (or redevelopment) of their online identity. To that end, we've assembled a list of seven common mistakes (the seven deadly sins, if you will) of law firm web development.

Greed

We think greed is an appropriate place to start, since often, and especially in these recessionary times, firms try to find ways to tighten the marketing budget. The prevailing cost-saving methods include pretending the internet doesn't exist, delaying the updating of a website until clients start going elsewhere and, the all too common mistake of hiring one's nephew to build the firm website. Let's first get one thing straight: we here at Cubicle Fugitive have nothing against nephews. They can be great kids, and even when they are not great kids, we get to send them home after family get-togethers—so, to us, nephews are a win-win situation. We also understand that by hiring said nephew to do the firm website, your upfront costs are usually lower, which in this economic climate is as important as ever.

Unfortunately there is a dark underbelly to nephews (and nieces and sons and daughters and friends of friends) that has probably cost you a few clients and the annual revenue stream that goes along with them. This seedier side of web development is easy to get caught up in: the nephew/niece/etc built a website in school ; they begin speaking in a strange language called HTML; you quickly become confused and disoriented and suddenly find that you are entrusting to them the entry point of your firm's branding.

Uh oh.

We've seen too many of these ne'er-do-wells create websites that are sorely lacking in business fundamentals, are built on shoddy platforms, are impossible to maintain and don't do anything for your search engine optimization. These "cost-effective" websites end up doing more harm to both your image and your bottom line than they do good to the marketing budget. Keep in mind that every piece of content, every piece of functionality, every design choice or navigation item should be vetted for relevance and used with the solitary purpose of bettering the user experience for your clients.

Building an efficient, client-friendly website requires a variety of skills including, but not limited to, copy writing, graphic design, usability, search-engine optimization, network infrastructure, database administration, and the list goes on. As professionals yourselves, it is important to hire people skilled in the art of communication, people able to forge an online presence that is reflective of your brand and properly expresses your firm's overall message.

Lust

Another common sin committed by some businesses, law firms or otherwise, is thinking that their website should be all about them, as if having a website is enough to attract attention without ever having to say anything meaningful or offer anything useful. We call these websites brochureware. Brochureware, while quick to create, misses the potential of the web's interactive power and its ability to engage viewers like no other medium.

To be blunt, your website is not about you or your firm. It's about addressing the needs of your audience—your clients. And the best way to address these needs is simple: provide meaningful, relevant and useful content. This content should clearly identify your firm's strengths, knowledge and experience in a way that engages your clients and demonstrates your usefulness to them. Your lawyer bios (you do have bios, right?) should outline what each lawyer has done, in which industries, at what courts and relate all of this information back to your areas of practice. Try to anticipate the questions your clients are asking and offer answers on every page that fits. In a sense, make content so useful, your clients are lusting after it.

Gluttony

Now that we've established the importance of content and that what you publish to the world should be relevant to those who are seeking information, you may be tempted to dump the entire firm knowledge base onto the web and let the fish feed. While we think it's great to satiate your visitors, we recommend not overfeeding them. Copious amounts of relevant content improves both the client experience and your search engine rankings, but content with no thought to relevance will only end up causing frustration and quick exits. Determining the fine line between overwhelming clients and intelligently informing them, while difficult, is often what separates websites that are gluttonous from those that simply whet the appetite.

Pride

Taking pride in your website is a gallant and worthwhile endeavour. All too often, unfortunately, we've found that firms who've built an online presence in the past (say back in 1999) have become too emotionally (and financially) invested to realize that they are currently serving up a stale, out-dated, dysfunctional user experience that inevitably ends up doing more harm than good. We are a fickle bunch these days, and website appetites change quickly. A website deemed professional back in 1999 is probably in dire need of a makeover today. We are not saying you have to start from scratch every few years. On the contrary, we believe the best websites realign constantly instead of redesign sporadically, meaning that frequent tweaks are better than infrequent, complete overhauls. The best redesigns/realigns take the time to discover what aspects of the current website are working and improve them while eliminating any areas that are not providing an expected return on investment.

Wrath

We often blame nephews for this one, but if there is a cardinal rule of website design, it is this:

Don't annoy your clients.

Seems simple enough but too many firms fall victim to unnecessary bells and/or whistles that act as barriers to client engagement. Splash pages are annoying. Music is annoying. Building a website that requires a plugin (i.e. Flash) is annoying. Don't do this to your poor clients. Being irritating just dares them to leave. There are plenty of non-intrusive ways of adding sizzle to a website without resorting to spinning email icons and flashing text. Keep things simple, direct and intuitive: your clients will thank you for it.

Sloth

So now you've got a professional website, with lots of informative and useful content, that is easy to find, and answers all the right questions. We see you rubbing your hands and saying, "well, at least we don't have to worry about that for another four years." To that, we simply blink and frown.

Unfortunately RWN (Rampant Website Neglect) is a prevalent and disheartening disease that is spreading to all areas of the internet these days. No matter how well stocked your website is with content, it can, and will, quickly become stale if proper care is not provided. It is vital to keep content fresh by constantly adding new and timely information, updating functionality, tweaking navigation, basically doing something—anything—to maintain visitors' interests. That something/anything can be news, publications, speaking engagements, big cases won, industry alerts or any other variety of information that clients find relevant and search engines find useful. You don't have to reinvent the wheel every few months, but it is important to keep your site looking like your care about its appearance. Slothfulness leads to irrelevance. Or is it the other way around—ah that's irrelevant. Avoid RWN. Keep your website updated!

Envy

This leads us to our final website sin: Envy. Some firms think it's best to mimic their competition or buy a design from a template store to save time. While everyone knows blatant copying is the sincerest form of flattery, it is not the best approach to branding your firm. The whole point of marketing—and your website is but one important cog in this wheel—is to differentiate yourself from the crowd. Basing your website on a predefined template suggests that you're willing to look like any other business that has a spare \$49 in their pocket. And mimicking your competitors all but ensures your message will get lost in the static.

Now we don't discourage checking out your competitors, and actually even *encourage* gathering a list of websites that tickle your fancy, but we recommend designing a website that properly reflects the ideals for which your firm stands and conveys the message your brand deserves.

And there you have it: seven of the deadliest law firm website development sins. Sins that, left unchecked, can waste an opportunity to fully engage and intelligently educate current and potential clients. Our websites can't all be saints, but avoiding these particular mistakes can help your firm achieve a more relevant and useful web presence. To sum up, it's important to keep your website looking fresh, with content that is regularly updated, client-friendly and easy to find. You should not partake in any annoying website antics (even if you don't find them particularly annoying). You *should* make a defining statement about your firm and last, but certainly not least, avoid nephews en-masse. They are a nefarious, brand-sucking lot that cannot be trusted outside of the odd family get-together and even then...

Kalvin MacLeod is a principle in the marketing firm Cubicle Fugitive and has many years of experience dealing with the unique time constraints of law firm marketing. Oddly enough, in another life, he was the IT manager for a few downtown firms and still wakes up on occasion from nightmares about the possibility of blackberry servers crashing and other sordid tales. He can be reached at kalvin.macleod@cubiclefugitive.com.