

Business & Careers

Quality work deserves a quality website



Luigi Benetton
Hi-Tech

Does your law firm's website reflect your firm accurately? Does the content on the site mesh with your firm's work and history? Do pictures of offices and people on the site match your actual offices, lawyers and staff?

If you answered yes to these questions, congratulations. Your website reflects the essence of your firm. That essence is square one for all design and content choices you make for your website.

"Lawyers should be able to look at a website and say 'yes, that's really us,'" says lawyer Garry Wise of Wise Law Office. "You don't want clients to come to your office and be surprised, thinking that it looks nothing like the photos they saw online."

Most clients find Hayes eLaw LLP via referrals from existing clients or lawyers. "We use our site mainly as a confirmation of capability," says partner Mark Hayes. "When potential clients get referrals, they go to the website."

Hayes is surprised when he meets lawyers who don't have websites for their practices. He concedes this might work for established lawyers that receive referral business. He also cautions "if you don't have the funds or the experience to create a professional-looking site, you're much better to have no site. The website can sell the firm. The website can also unsell the firm."

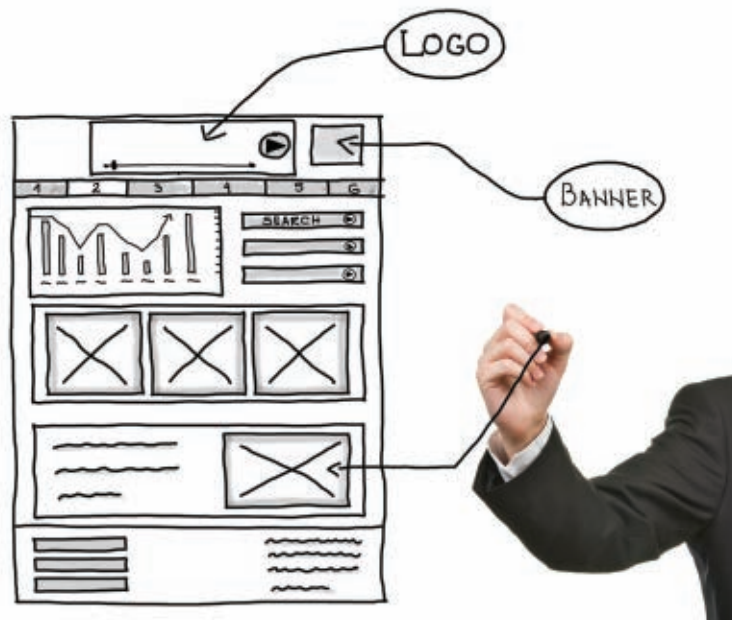
That said, the original Hayes eLaw website, which got great reviews and served the firm for its first three years, cost him less than \$1,000. "It was designed by a 15-year-old high school student, the son of a neighbour of mine who was looking for some work on the side," he says.

Hayes published hayeslaw.com in January after a split with former associates. "We adapted the website we were using with Heydary Hayes," he says, noting that the site worked well for them.

At the time this was written, Wise was having wiselaw.net redone. He describes the current site as self-built "using really old technology (Microsoft Frontpage, a discontinued product) that I know how to use. I'm surveying what's hot and what's not in the web world right now."

"The standard now is a WordPress-based website that lets you do all kinds of stuff," like administration, adding content and embedding videos, Wise has found.

These abilities matter to lawyers who want to maintain blogs, news



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feeds and other tools that help them keep their site's content fresh. Wise maintains an active blog apart from his main site. He's facing the question of how to integrate the contents of his blog into his new site. "Does it become part of an information library within the site?" he wonders.

While a firm's essence may be unique, its website and everything about it must hew to certain common criteria. Number one on that list: make it easy for people to find your contact information.

More nebulously, the firm must communicate its ability to be flexible and to deliver cost-effective solutions, all while maintaining consistency with its other marketing materials, its offices, and anything else clients associate with the firm.

Hayes thinks it's difficult for lawyers to tell clients that they provide cost-effective representation when they do so within opulent offices. "Clients tell themselves they can't afford this," he says.

Clearly conveying practice areas makes researching lawyers much easier. That helps to explain why home page banners are ceding their place to carousels, a rotating sequence of panels. Marcee Ruby counselled one of her clients to use a three-panel carousel to quickly explain the client's three practice areas. Each carousel panel features "adaptations of the main visuals that the client uses in print for those three lines of business," says Ruby, creative director for Side-show Creative.

The language used on a site, while formal, also depends on both a firm's personality and what makes its clients comfortable. "Smaller" clients may prefer an approachable, even folksy and personal site, while "corporate" clients may want a more professional look and tone.

Photos of the actual lawyers are obvious requirements. "You should update them often enough so that

they look like who you are, not who you were," Wise says. "As long as I keep aging gracefully, I'll keep updating my photo."

Site content has to be easy both for search engines to index and for people to read. Google, Bing, Yahoo

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et al. will decipher clear English that suits a firm's audience, and they increasingly disregard dated SEO-boosting tricks.

Writing for the human audience also takes focused original content. "I'm not interested in reading tons of reposts," Ruby says. "I want to know how that law firm thinks. I want to understand who they are as a practice."

Hayes adds: "Most law firm websites tend to talk about achievements that aren't of much interest to the client."

Where possible, images used on a site must go beyond stock photos. "You recognize them the minute you see them," Ruby says. While she

concedes that websites need some colour, "if you're going to use stock photos, it better not be obvious."

Since people increasingly visit websites from smartphones and tablets, today's web developers frequently configure sites so that they automatically look "right" on the screen on which they're viewed. The concept is known as adaptive design.

Think twice about using Adobe Flash on your site. While Flash is still commonly seen on web pages viewed on traditional computers, Adobe stopped distributing Flash Player for mobile devices in 2012, while Apple has never supported Flash on any of its popular devices.

Keep in mind that lawyers can have their sites do more than display yesteryear's "brochureware." Posting client intake forms online and offering clients the ability to securely monitor their own files are just two of the possibilities. While his site doesn't yet feature such tools, Hayes likes the idea of clients visiting his site to get information about their cases "without having to call us and ask."

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