

Nine tips for improving your law firm email system

EMAIL IS A deceptively vexing issue for a small firm or solo practitioner. Since we don't have unlimited support staff, many of us depend on email for keeping in touch with our practice. But it can sometimes seem like there's no way to get the features of big-firm email systems on a small-firm budget. Here are some tips to help you get more out of your email:

1 Don't use your ISP for email. Internet service providers (ISPs) always give their customers a free email address. But ISPs also attract a huge amount of spam. Thus, they often use aggressive spam filters that can discard legitimate inbound messages. As a corollary to Murphy's Law, it's guaranteed that the one email you need most is the one that will get filtered out. It's not worth the risk so you can save a few bucks.

2 Don't use AOL for email. Everything above goes double for AOL. Not to mention that every outbound message has an AOL ad tacked to the bottom. Ugh.

3 Get your own Internet domain name. Once you have your own domain name, you can have a permanent email address. Otherwise, if you ever need to switch email pro-

viders, you'll have to send a notice to all your clients and reprint your business cards, because your email address will change.

4 Try IMAP instead of POP. With the proliferation of email-enabled devices, IMAP is progressively displacing POP as the preferred approach for getting email. With POP, you're copying the message onto your computer and deleting the message from the mail server. With IMAP, you're leaving all your messages on the mail server and reading them from there. This means that

with IMAP, your email inbox will look the same no matter where you log in — from your office, from your laptop, or from your smartphone. It's more efficient because then you only have to handle every message once.

5 Cheap systems can be more reliable than expensive ones. Counterintuitive, but here's why. Suppose an expensive email system costs \$1000 and is 99.9% reliable, while a cheap system costs \$100 and is only 99% reliable. The cheap system costs 1/10th as much and has a 10x greater chance of failure (1% vs. 0.1%). But if you use two cheap systems together, you'll only spend

\$200 but get 99.99% reliability (0.1% x 0.1%). OK, enough math for today.

6 Don't forward jokes & stories. Sad to say, many of the "absolutely true" anecdotes passed around via email are, well, not true. If you forward these messages, you run the risk that your law firm's name is going to be attached to them longer than you care to contemplate.

7 Pay for a good email inbox. Between the extremes of ISP email and big-firm email lies many companies who specialize in email for small businesses. (Webmail.us and MailStreet are the two I use.) You can get a single mailbox starting at about \$15/month. If that sounds expensive, consider what you spend on your cell phone. You get what you pay for — and if email is mildly important to your practice, it's worth it.

8 Use Gmail to back up & archive email. Backing up email from your computer is annoying and difficult. Instead, set up a free Gmail account and send copies of all your inbound and outbound mail to that address. Without any extra labor from you, Gmail will create a very tidy archive of your email messages that's easily searched. So when opposing counsel claims you didn't email a crucial document eight months ago, you can pull out proof in 15 seconds. They won't mess with you next time.

9 Use multiple accounts to sort your email. If you use one email address for everything — business email, personal email, mailing list subscriptions, etc. — your inbox will become a slough of despond. Consider using separate email boxes to keep functions separate.

— Matthew Butterick

ATOMIC VISION
www.atomicvision.com
323.544.1451

