

The two questions every law firm website must answer (and the nine ways it often goes wrong)

LAWYERS KNOW the importance of a persuasive argument. But many overlook that a website is also an argument. You, the lawyer, have the burden of persuading potential clients to become actual clients. And your website is the opening statement.

Your website visitors may have different legal problems, but they all start out looking for answers to the same two questions:

The first is the capability question — *can* you do the job? Do you have the skills and knowledge to solve their legal problem?

The second is the credibility question — *will* you do the job? Can potential clients trust you to bring about a successful result?

Law firm websites often aren't persuasive because they don't answer these basic questions. It may seem like a simple task, but I've collected nine common ways it goes wrong:

1 Failure to update. Outdated information looks sloppy and careless. It's also potentially a violation of California Rules of Professional Conduct 1-400(D)(1) and (2)

(prohibiting “untrue” or “deceptive” statements in your public communications). Whatever information you put on your website needs to be kept current. If you can't commit to that, then reduce the information to a manageable level.



2 Ignoring the client's perspective. Among life's cherished activities, hiring a lawyer ranks up there with dentistry. It helps to look at your website not as your mother would — with unconditional love and pride — but as a potential client would, with skepticism and maybe a little fear. If you were in their shoes, what would put you at ease?

3 Pictures of real estate. A mystifying epidemic. Many firms have photos of office buildings or conference rooms on their websites. What is this meant to communicate to potential clients? “We need your business because our rent is expensive”? You can do better.

4 Hiding the ball. Be specific and direct about what kinds of matters you handle. Avoid meaningless sloganeering (“We are a law firm unlike any other” is a repeat offender) and impenetrable jargon.

5 Offering free legal assistance. We have public law libraries. We have Google. You don't need to supplement their services by giving your visitors summaries of the law and the forms they'll need to fill out. That's what they pay *you* for. Convince visitors that they need you, not that they can get by without you.

6 Saying it instead of showing it. The best way to demonstrate credibility to potential clients is by showing them what you've done for past clients. I love the PI firms who have a list of big-dollar verdicts on the front of the website. What would be the equivalent for your practice area?

7 Overestimating attention span. You're a busy person, right? Assume that visitors to your website are also busy people. Their attention is a gift. So get to the point. Don't waste their time by larding your website with meaningless extras (e.g. introductory Flash animations). And keep pages of text short. Because the next lawyer on their list is just one click away.

8 Burying your contact information. Don't spoil the moment when your potential client is ready to contact you. Make it easy by putting your contact information in a consistent location on every page.

9 No website at all. If you're the kind of lawyer whose potential clients are in prison, you can ignore this tip. But for everyone else: these days, having no website is like having no voicemail. It's a basic expectation among potential clients. Even one page with your name, address and phone is better than nothing. Trust me — this Internet thing is poised to really take off in the next few years.

— Matthew Butterick

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