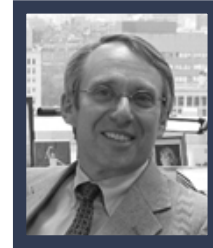


Website Helps Law and Dispute Resolution Firm Build Credibility and Grow

By David Hoffman, Esq.

David Hoffman of Boston Law Collaborative, LLC, has in connection with his work as a mediator, arbitrator, and attorney, assisted in the design and development of a number of web sites. From this experience he has found that capturing mindshare of potential clients takes more than just providing them with company history, lawyers' profiles, and promises of high quality service. The site has to have meaningful content – information that potential clients can use – as they form their first impressions of the firm. In this paper he discusses the impact that a dynamic, timely, and content-rich website can have in the growth of a professional services firm.



Boston Law Collaborative's website has become one of our most important tools in attracting new clients and enhancing the visibility and credibility of the firm. In addition, the site improves our efficiency and helps clients communicate with each other and with us. The web site has become the repository of tools that we use every day.

These advantages didn't just happen – they were the result of our philosophy of putting strategic knowledge on a site that could be accessed by clients, potential clients, and even competitors. This philosophy, which involves opening our tool box to share with those who visit our site, was then implemented by a web publishing software company, QUOIN, Inc., which offered us a unique solution. Because BLC is a small firm, we needed a website that could be updated and maintained by our own staff, thus enabling us to control the cost of providing timely information and frequently updated forms and articles. The system created by QUOIN gave us that level of control and has turned our site into a powerful communications tool.

SOME INTERNET BACKGROUND

Although the technology that drives the Internet has existed since the 1970's, it has emerged as a communications medium only during the last decade. In 1993 there were 130 websites in the network. Then an explosion of interest happened, and the Internet grew around the globe living up to its name - the World Wide Web - with over 650,000 websites by 1997. According to the technology analyst Netvention, the number of unique, active web sites reached 6.4 million in 2005 (www.netvention.com/webstats.php).

Today it is hard to imagine an organization not having a website. But ironically all of this growth has created tons of data for web users with no easy way to determine what is useful information. When we started defining our web site characteristics for BLC, we were determined that our web site would not contribute to this problem.

WEBSITES AND LAW FIRMS

Obviously there are exceptions, but the vast majority of law firms' web sites are electronic brochures. The sites provide general information about the firm, their lawyers, and their track record, but little up to date information that the prospect can use. Some firms overcome the lack of topical information by using links to other sites. This might minimize continuous maintenance but has the serious disadvantage that the prospect has been sent off to another site.

Clearly, if a web site is going to do its job of creating a lasting impression, content is the key. Flashy graphics may dazzle visitors but leave them more impressed with the graphic artist than the site's owner.

OUR WEBSITE PHILOSOPHY

We wanted our web site to go beyond providing information about who we are and what we do, but to be a source of knowledge that would be useful to a site visitor even if they never contacted us. This wasn't just a design goal, but a strategic philosophy. As a group of lawyers specializing in mediation we thought it important that our web site provide insight into the processes and information pertinent to help prospects understand that reconciliation and settlements are always best when both sides see that mutually acceptable agreements are possible and that "win or lose" applies to sports, not agreements.

WEBSITE PRIORITIES

Throughout the development of our website, we had three priorities.

- 1. Robust content.** Our first priority was that our web site had to be a source of useful information applicable to the needs of a site visitor. We believe that sharing what we know is not only a form of generosity that will often be reciprocated, but also gives the visitor the opportunity to assess more accurately whether our approach to law and dispute resolution is what they are looking for.
- 2. Custom design.** Our second priority was that the site should have an appealing custom look and feel. As a small firm, we cannot afford all the bells and whistles that a mega-firm can, but a custom-designed site communicates to visitors a high level of seriousness about our work. Because our work involves a novel approach to resolving conflict – namely, a commitment to collaboration and problem solving rather than litigation – our design needed to reflect, in a straightforward, non-glitzy way, the fact that we are not an off-the-shelf firm offering off-the-shelf solutions.
- 3. Timely Updates.** Our third priority was keeping the site content timely. Have you ever walked into an office where the plants looked neglected or the magazines in the reception area were three years old? The immediate impression – unfair though it may be – is that the firm is not taking care of business. Outdated content on a web site communicates the same message.

With these three items on our wish list, we realized that we might have a dilemma. Our standards and expectations probably required a level of design sophistication that was beyond our budget. It was also apparent that our strong emphasis on content was not compatible with our in-house technical resources.

To complicate matters further, we realized we had several additional priorities. We wanted the site to be pleasing to the eye, with photographs of our staff, and easy to navigate. In

