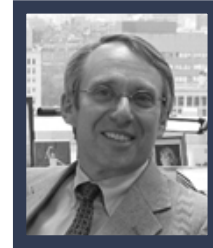


Website Helps Law and Dispute Resolution Firm Build Credibility and Grow

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 toolbox 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

addition, we needed a site that could be easily and affordably maintained. BLC is too small to have its own IT staff, and therefore site maintenance has to be accomplished in parallel with, and be part of, the regular workflow of existing staff.

We decided to write a specification and put it out to bid, hoping that we could find a custom web designer who was willing to accommodate our champagne taste and beer budget.

Serendipitously, just before going out to bid, we were introduced to QUOIN, a Boston-based software company that had launched a web publishing service based on technologies they developed while engaged on consulting projects for online publishers, including a major east coast newspaper. Their comprehensive service includes design, content preparation, establishing the site, and selecting an appropriate Internet Systems Provider (ISP). They also train the staff on how to maintain the site as part of regular workflow.

When we first met QUOIN's staff and leadership, we were pleased that they did not talk bits and bytes. Instead, they

asked us about our business and helped us understand, articulate, and prioritize our needs. They introduced us to two graphics designers and helped us pick the one that had the right mix of skills for our project. And, most important, the price of their package was within our budget.

RESULTS

To date the site has gone well beyond our expectations. It went live in June 2003 and in the first month data retrieval was 424 bytes. By June 2004 data retrieval was 1,192,427 kilobytes/month. That traffic has created new clients. We track the source of referrals for all new cases, and the rate of referrals from the web site alone account for 15 - 20% of our new cases this year. In addition, many clients who were referred by friends or other professionals used our site to do their due diligence and report to us that our site's content was a contributing factor in their decision to hire us. These clients tell us that our site gave us credibility and gave them useful information.

The growth in site usage is shown in the following chart.

Date	Traffic (in bytes)	Traffic (as % of traffic in January 2005)
June 2003	424	0.00%
July 2003	3,967,953	0.31%
August 2003	140,639,711	10.92%
September 2003	258,187,349	20.04%
October 2003	305,847,149	23.74%
November 2003	375,887,570	29.18%
December 2003	310,109,598	24.07%
January 2004	999,888,285	77.61%
February 2004	656,463,498	50.95%
March 2004	848,806,904	65.88%
April 2004	1,060,193,378	82.29%
May 2004	1,087,605,329	84.42%
June 2004	1,192,427,156	92.55%
July 2004	1,147,675,217	89.08%
August 2004	1,179,059,283	91.52%
September 2004	1,146,717,092	89.01%
October 2004	741,599,015	57.56%
November 2004	921,334,348	71.51%
December 2004	954,317,338	74.07%
January 2005	1,288,357,032	100.00%

This information, taken from our ISP's data, reflects a dip in the fall of 2004, which appears to be a re-calibration of the data measurement, not a decline in activity. BLC's referrals from the web site, if anything, increased during that period of time.

The richness of the site information has also had other benefits, not the least of which is staff efficiency. We have often found that it is easier and faster to go to our website for information and forms rather than resorting to a search of files, documents, books, and our server.

The website has also proved useful in complex cases as a mechanism to provide the pertinent documents and supporting information to all of the parties involved in a case. We accomplish this by posting all of the information to our web site in a confidential password-protected area that only the concerned parties can access. This has enabled groups to expedite the process of exchanging proposals, especially in cases where the parties are on different continents. We have

found that this improved access to documents shortens the process time and often leads to better final agreements.

SUMMARY

An outstanding web site is essential today if a firm wants to stand out. BLC's partnership with QUOIN on our website development project succeeded beyond our expectations. QUOIN listened, responded, and usually was one step ahead of us in understanding our needs. I am convinced that BLC's success during its first two years is attributable in no small measure to the user-friendly, timely, and content-rich website that QUOIN created.