Trash the flash, keep your law firm website design simple

The biggest and most frequent mistake made in website design is a failure to keep it simple. Simple and fast access to your information is the key to website success. More intricate sites that are difficult to navigate or take a long time to load do not attract traffic. The first minute a user spends on a website is crucial.

A common mistake is to structure the content in the same style as a book or article. A variety of studies over the last few years have shown that we don't read websites the same way we would a book or paper. Our eyes don't follow the same patterns across a screen as they do on a physical page, and your

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content should reflect that. Try to make the most important parts of the page stand out through contrast or highlight colours.

When viewing a webpage, people's eyes tend to skim over or even skip long paragraphs entirely. Ensure that your most important points get read by placing them in bullet lists between short paragraphs. Breaking pages into sections using large, bold headlines also helps.

Your most important points should be easy to find. There are three things that people generally want to know when they visit your website: what your areas of practice are; who is available; and

how to contact those people. Each of these should be clearly marked on every page.

When listing your areas of practice, bold, list or otherwise demarcate that information from the rest of the page. If you list important cases or otherwise expand on your expertise, the longer paragraphs should be secondary to your brief overview.

If your practice is made up of several team members, profile them briefly. Potential clients are more likely to call you if you offer them a set of choices from which to select.

Every site should have a clearly marked link on every page to your contact information. Your contact page should not have unnecessary

information cluttering the screen. Simply post your mailing address, phone, fax and e-mail, and possibly a small map showing where your offices are located. Your visitors might already know who you are and just want to know which number to call.

Many law websites are guilty of the same basic mistakes. They are frequently too dark, too crowded and, strangely, too flashy.

It is much easier to read dark text on a light background than vice versa. The longer your visitors stare at white text on a black screen the more their eyes strain, making them uncomfortable and more likely to move on to another firm's site.

Just because your job involves

extensive writing doesn't mean you need to display that skill on your website. Keep your content short and simple. You'll impress your visitors with a feeling of efficiency and straightforwardness before they even get past the first paragraph.

One of the most common mistakes I see on law websites is an overuse of flash animation. Flash is a great tool but it isn't always the best tool for the job. If you run a media company, or want to show off a photography portfolio, Flash is a great way to be interactive and intriguing. If you have a website selling your legal services, however, Flash doesn't make any sense.

Flash websites often run into

Keep law firm website fresh by posting frequent updates

problems such as slow loading time, browser crashes, browser incompatibility and freezing. Have you ever visited a site that took a long time to load? Or a site that actually froze your browser and caused it to crash? Poorly coded Flash can cause problems and frustrate visitors. Even well-made Flash websites can cause aggravation. An interesting opening to your site grabs attention, but every time someone comes back and has to sit through the same animation their interest diminishes.

Don't forget to update your site regularly, even if you only post something small every month or so. Out-of-date links and information leave the impression that the owner may be neglectful or careless. Refreshing the site with new content creates a strong impression of competence. Even minor changes in content made frequently leave the impression that you are up-to-date and will draw repeat visits.

There are a variety of ways to improve your existing website. One very simple method is to have another web developer study your website and give you a report covering problem areas, strengths, weaknesses and suggestions for improvement. Many web designers will offer this service for a reasonable fee. In return, you gain invaluable information about how to improve your presence on the web. If you have an updates page that hasn't been updated in six months, it's not an update.

A website should provide an inviting and simple means to access your business. Even seemingly minor irritations may be cutting into its attractiveness and potential growth. ■

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