



BY HEATHER SUTTIE

Websites: A Plague of Sameness

MARKET

There is an art to creating a law firm website that stands out from the crowd. Unfortunately, standout sites are in the minority. That's a shame because this plague of sameness cements the notion that one firm is no different than the next — and, of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

Your website has five basic uses: it helps people find you; prospects use it to learn about you; clients use it to validate their decision to hire you; prospective students and lateral hires use it to assess you; and other counsel use it to check you out. Having overhauled a number of law firm sites, I can report that the comment "We want to look like (competing law firm)" will invariably crop up. My response, invariably, is "Why?"

Is website sameness a symptom of discomfort firms feel in letting their differences and personalities shine? Why aren't more firms' sites reflective of their clients — speaking to them directly and offering what they want to see? After all, a law firm's site is not about the firm; it's about the client.

There seems to be a general sameness formula: logo on the top left with a central billboard featuring a photo of a handshake, cityscape or, heaven forbid, scales of justice, law books or empty meeting rooms. Below that is overwritten copy detailing what the firm does, its history and perhaps a listing of who's speaking where and who's written what. This lack of originality results in many sites that look, read and feel the same.

If that weren't bad enough, those responsible for the site often follow this formula in the mistaken belief that conventionality translates into professionalism. It's time to break the mould.

Dare to be Different

London, UK-based Mishcon de Reya overhauled its site in March. Popularly known for family law, including the handling of the late Princess of Wales's divorce in 1996, the firm's corporate, employment, real estate and litigation files accounted for 90 per cent of revenue last year.

According to Elliot Moss, Director of Business Development, an overhaul was undertaken because Mishcon needed to emphasize its strength in business law. The transformation

didn't happen overnight, but the results were well worth it. "We spent 18 months getting to this messaging through client research, internal interviews, understanding the business model of the firm and a thorough competitive analysis, followed by further practice-specific work to identify the key points about what was different about that practice."

Competitive analysis found little or no differentiating traits among firms. However, opinions of Mishcon's clients and employees and a market perception survey revealed what the firm was best known for: a commitment to doing whatever it takes to win for its clients and applying it to business. Hence, the firm's credo: "It's business. But it's personal."

That succinct message is reflected throughout the firm's website, which most notably features the placement of a search box in the middle of the home page accompanying the question, "How can we help you?"

"Most firms list what they offer and direct you accordingly. This is okay, but it doesn't give the client the opportunity to actually ask you exactly what is on their mind," says Moss. "So taking our inspiration from Google, we have made our search as intuitive as possible. Ask a question in plain English and receive a simple page with results that give you different ways of exploring your answer. After all, it should be your choice as the client in terms of how you like to receive info."

Mishcon's revamped website was a hit. "Anecdotal feedback has been fantastic," says Moss. "Our clients love it, independent reviewers love it. Additionally, the stats show that people spend longer on our site now — 35 per cent longer — and look at 30 per cent more pages." Moreover, digital agency Intendance, which reviews websites across the UK legal sector, named Mishcon a "Mover and Shaker" in April and doled out kudos for its website's intuitive search, feature boxes, simple navigation, clean page layout, stylish design and the inclusion of a micro-site for its New York office.

Micro-sites have also become an essential tool for Canadian firms like Siskinds LLP. The London, Ontario-based firm began with a "Class Action" micro-site in 2004 and now has five micro-sites in total. "We feel having a micro-site provides

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more depth for clients who need more than could reasonably appear on a practice profile page," says Laurie Hause, Siskinds' Director of Technology & Marketing.

Siskinds launched its overhauled site this month, recognizing that a higher level of functionality and presentation of information was critical for clients who want to receive what they want when they want it. New features include "Live Chat," where the firm's clients have online contact with the client service group, so that a team member or one of the firm's lawyers can answer questions immediately. Another is the "Resources" section, which asks visitors to rank articles by relevancy. A new application for the Class Action micro-site, meanwhile, enables an individual who believes he or she should be a member of a particular class action to submit immediate information.

Dawna Henderson, President and CEO of digital agency henderson bas, says that law firms need to change the way they engage with clients online. "Neither mobile nor social media are new concepts; however, many professional-services firms have been slow to adopt them. It's time for firms to engage in one-to-one conversations."

She says that one of the most important elements of a firm's website is its ability to serve clients on the move. "Providing simplicity for users through a mobile site is imperative. This

target is constantly using his or her smartphone. To properly target users, you have to go to where his or her eyeballs are."

Get Experts

Lawyers are best at lawyering. Legal marketers are best at overhauling websites. Says Moss, "The underlying reason why there is so much sameness is that lawyers are lawyers; they are not communications experts. You wouldn't ask a communications expert to solve an IP issue for you, and you wouldn't ask a lawyer to write an ad or design a website."

Henderson echoes the sentiment that lawyers need to trust marketers: "If their CMO is recommending the site be pink, well there's probably a damn good reason for it."

And that's the nut of it. Your site is your No. 1 marketing vehicle. Traits of sameness will never help your firm be distinctive in the marketplace any more than a paint-by-numbers picture will ever be deemed a masterpiece. ■

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