

the **digital**edge —Building an Internet Presence

By Warren Redlich

Today, being on Facebook® and LinkedIn® isn't enough of a Web presence for a lawyer. If you're a solo practitioner, you really need your own Web site if you want to attract clients. I created mine (www.RedlichLaw.com) seven years ago when I opened my own law office, and it now has more than 12,000 visitors a month, generates nearly all of my office's revenue, and supports three lawyers and a small staff. In addition, I created my own lawyer blog, which has more than 4,500 visitors a month, and a related Web site, www.Town-Court.com, that is used by more than 150,000 visitors a month.

I'm also active on Facebook and LinkedIn but not as active on MySpace™ and Twitter™. Through this work of building a Web presence, I've learned what works and what doesn't work. Here are some tips on where to focus your energy in attracting clients online.

1. Cast your net wide on the Internet. The most "traditional" method of creating a Web presence is having your own Web site. Blogs can be effective if you keep them professional and updated. You also can consider writing articles for online legal publications and responding to posts on other legal Web sites and blogs. Additionally, there are several Web directories that list lawyers for free or charge for inclusion. For example, our www.Town-Court.com Web site has a free lawyer directory. Be careful that you don't overpay to be listed on such Web sites.

2. Create your Web content. Carefully craft content for your Web site that details your law practice areas and office locations. Avoid boilerplate language and write in your own words as search engines value originality. When potential clients search the Web for information and help, their searches are extremely varied. It's very hard to rank high in Google™ search results for a phrase like "personal injury," but it becomes easier when you use "long-tail phrases" like "car accident lawyer in Boise."

3. Optimize search results.

If Internet users can't find you online, your Web site is not doing you any good. The most important thing you should focus on is your own name. If people are thinking of hiring you, they will do a Web search for your name. What will they find? For one lawyer I know, the first result used to be a disciplinary proceeding; that type of result is not going to help.

How do you control where your name appears in a Web search? The answer is "Search Engine Optimization" or SEO. SEO is the process of improving traffic to a Web site through unpaid search results, which typically occurs on major search engines like Google™, Yahoo!®, and Bing™. It is a part of the larger field of search engine marketing (SEM), which includes paid ads. Most of the traffic that my Web sites receive is the result of SEO.

Your name is easier to optimize if, like mine, it is unusual. If your name is John Smith, then it is likely impossible to rank well on a Web search for your name alone. But, you can optimize search results for your name in combination with your profession and location. For example, including key words such as "Attorney John Smith in Omaha" and "DWI lawyer John Smith" on your Web pages will yield better results in searches. SEO techniques include:

- On-page optimization (designing a page for a specific keyword or keywords)
- Site optimization (organizing your Web site's pages by keywords with internal links)
- Link building (having other Web sites to link to your Web sites)

4. Don't overdo social networking. While social networking Web sites can provide potential avenues for clients, you should not solely focus your energy on social networking Web sites to create revenue.

I have been very active on Facebook and LinkedIn for years, yet neither Web site has generated a single case for me. My MySpace page generated one case a few years ago and a few inquiries regarding entertainment law but nothing recently. To put it in numerical terms, Facebook is the biggest social network referrer to my law firm Web site, and it generates less than 0.1 percent of traffic. I'm still active on Facebook and LinkedIn though because I enjoy them.

If you are using social networking Web sites for personal reasons, remember that potential clients may search social networking Web sites for your name. If they find photographs of you partying, you may have just lost their business.

With some basic knowledge of how to optimize your Web presence and professionalism in your Web content, you'll be on your way to building the client base you want. The Internet won't generate huge business for you overnight. But, if you consistently devote a few hours a week to your Web presence, you should see positive results in time.

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