

Hosting A Law Firm Web Site – What Could Possibly Go Wrong?

By Peter K. Suh

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After spending a boatload of money on your law firm's web site, crafting the bios and retouching the photos, few examine the importance of having a proper host. But the wrong one can cost you money, time, reputation and potential business.

Your firm might have spent precious time crafting the perfect bios and selecting the ideal photographs for its new website. You may have exhausted hours researching the professional rules of conduct to construct each sentence beyond reproach. But before all that money and time can benefit you and before your law firm's beautifully designed and well researched website can be seen on the internet, you must first choose the proper host.

A web "host" is a company with a computer or server connected to the internet where your law firm's website will reside. Your website will essentially have its address or be "hosted" on the host's server. The host has specialized software connecting it to the internet 24/7/365, thus allowing your website to be visible to a third party searching on the web.

The most popular hosting resolution for law firms is to pay a third party host such as [MDD Hosting](#), [Just Host](#), or [Host Gator](#). A good host can be a natural extension of your firm and enable you to flourish, attract new clients, and grow in reputation, but a poor host can cost you money, time, reputation, and potential business.

There are many issues to consider as you go about selecting the right host for your law firm's website. Each of the following issues could have legal, technical, monetary, and other ramifications.

Reputation

Do your due diligence and ask around. Ask knowledgeable colleagues about their experiences with various hosts. Seek the advice of your local bar association and the [American Bar Association](#). Conduct searches to find consumer feedback as well as to get a sense of the company's financial situation. You can do simple [Google](#) searches or search on sites such as [CNET](#). Keep in mind that nearly all hosts have some negative reviews and some staunchly devoted clients.

Location/Jurisdiction

After you have a list of recommended hosts, one of the first things to look at is the country the host is located in. This is particularly important because there are a seemingly endless number of choices

from all four corners of the earth and the country of origin will determine the laws under which the host operates.

It is highly recommended to choose a host that resides in the country where your law firm is located, as it will be under the jurisdiction of laws you are most familiar with. If this is not possible, then selecting a host in the United States or in the E.U. is a strong option because the governing laws are relatively stable and standard. The main reason for going with a host outside of the United States is having a client base predominantly overseas. By doing some smart jurisdictional research and shopping, you can choose the host that represents the best solution for your specific needs.

Location also presents technical issues. Where your host is located may affect the speed with which your current and potential clients can access your website. Also, the ease of reaching the host company and the language that technical support is offered in may vary with location.

Another issue to consider when it comes to the location of the hosting company is the potential cost with respect to the time and money it could take to address certain legal and security issues. For example, many foreign hosts may not be in a position to provide certain securities or assurances that are recommended in order to entrust them with your firm's website. Each country has its own set of cyber security laws, and some are just beginning to enact web or internet fraud, or other kinds of laws to protect clients. You can avoid these types of issues by conducting thorough research before signing a contract.

Within the United States, it may matter very little to visitors of your website which state the web host is located in, so long as they provide a good connection. However, location may be important to your firm, and it is up to you to decide to go with a national web host provider or a local one for any number of reasons. For example, if your law firm is national or located in multiple states, it may not matter in which state the host is located. A national web host provider, however, may be able to provide greater security, lower fees, and more reliable service. Also, there are many more options to choose from if you are choosing from hosts across the country. If you are a firm conducting all or most of your business in one state you may opt to have a more intimate business relationship with a local provider. The proximity to the host's data center could result in optimal performance as well as provide easier access to their office if you should ever need to meet with them in person.

The Terms of Agreement

When it comes to reading through the terms of agreement with a potential host, there are several things to look for:

Price

Price is very important because it affects all of the other issues. The level of tech support, bandwidth, security, and disaster recovery you get will be determined by the price you pay. Or in other words, you

get what you pay for. Conventional wisdom is to pay for what your firm currently needs. However, this tactic is contingent upon selecting a host that allows you the flexibility to upgrade in the future.

Often, web hosts can offer other services as part of a package deal if you sign up for a hosting account. A factor to consider in package deals is domain name registration. Some hosting companies, such as [Go Daddy](#) and [Network Solutions](#), will register your domain name for you. Another service often offered as part of a web hosting package is website design.

Again, find the right price for what your law firm currently needs. Because a website is critical today for outreach, marketing, and building of reputation, you don't want to be overly sparing. However, you also don't want to be paying for more than is necessary. Pay for what you need and make sure that you will be able to upgrade for a fair price in the future. The flexibility will be helpful down the line if, for example, you decide in the future that you want to add features to your website such as streaming videos or secure client portals.

Billing

Billing issues with your host can come up very often if you don't pay attention from the beginning. This may seem overly obvious (probably why it is often overlooked), but it is important to understand how much will you be charged and how often you will be charged. Many hosts offer cheaper rates for longer deals. Some law firms initially sign up for month-to-month billing even though it is often more expensive. When the law firm is satisfied with the hosting company, they will then sign up for longer term contracts such as a discounted annual plan.

Disk Space

Many hosts will offer way more space than your site might need. Your website's disk space needs will depend on features such as the number of pages and the amount of graphics, sound files, or streaming videos you want on your website. It is a good idea to have enough extra space to allow room to grow. Make sure to know what you need before choosing a web host.

Bandwidth

Look out for details on how much traffic the terms of agreement actually allows, especially if the host advertises "unlimited" bandwidth. Check to see if there are any restrictions on monthly traffic. You will want to know if access will be denied if you go over that restriction or if you will be charged an exorbitant fee. Keep in mind that graphics, sound files, and streaming videos will require much more bandwidth than simple HTML pages. Understanding how much bandwidth your firm's website actually needs will help determine the package and the price you should seek.

Uptime Guarantee

The host should be able to guarantee that they are functional and up and running at least 99.5% of the time. Getting a credit based on this guarantee is extremely tedious and often the dollar amount is

miniscule. Regardless, you should make sure that your potential host has a history of uptime reliability.

Tech Support

Very few things can be as worrisome and stressing as poor tech support. In this day and age, a law firm's website is one of its greatest marketing tools. A website is always on and potential clients could quickly be turned off from outdated information or a malfunctioning website (e.g., broken links and videos that won't stream). This can cause as much damage as a good website can have a positive impact.

It's important to know upfront what kind of customer service a web host provider offers. The best hosts usually have support technicians available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It is also important that the host employ redundant means of support contact, such as online chat, phone, twitter and email, so that you can find the most convenient and preferred method at any given time. One easy way to assess a company's customer service ability is by actually testing it. This is something that can generally be done for free by finding their contact information. Simply give them a call or send them an email inquiring about their customer service. Try to send them an email on a weekend or a late hour and see how long it takes for them to respond. Doing so grants you insight to the web host provider's efficiency and effectiveness.

Your Website's Neighbors

You will want to do some research on who else your host does business with. Some hosts pay little attention to who they are actually hosting. In other words, many hosts will allow pornographic sites, spammers, and other websites that create security issues on their network indiscriminately. This alone may have some negative consequences for your law firm's reputation. But even if you push moral issues to the side, there could still be a further negative impact. A network can get blocked or [black holed](#) for spamming. Then other networks can refuse email originated from IP addresses that are blacklisted. Unfortunately, some hosts will try to redistribute tainted IPs to new clients, in which case your email may be blocked, filtered out, and never get to its destination, all because of the activities of the previous IP users. Chances are you will not even notice this until damage has already been done. Check with all potential hosts to verify if any of their networks are black holed.

Security

The web host should have security for you as an account holder as well as security for their servers against hackers and attacks. You will need to examine both of these types of security when deciding on your host. A web host can help protect your firm's website through tools such as firewalls and security patches. Your host should have specific software to guard against [DDoS](#) attacks. The more protection the web host provider offers will greatly decrease the odds that your website will be the victim of tampering.

The last thing you want is to find that your law firm's website has been hacked and information you've collected from a potential client has been compromised.

If your host does not have proper security, then multiple websites hosted by them can all be hacked together. Hackers can attack a vulnerable spot directly on the host's server or the hackers can exploit one website on a server and then use that website to contaminate the other websites hosted on the same server.

Consider whether the potential web hosting provider offers extended security protection, either as a standard feature or for an extra fee. Secure File Transfer Protocol (SFTP), which encrypts both commands and data so that they cannot be compromised during the upload process, is a feature that protects both websites and the web host. This extra layer of security prevents passwords and other sensitive data from being openly transmitted over a network. If necessary, you should be able to obtain a TLS (Transport Layer Security) or an SSL (Secure Socket Layer) certificate for encryption of all sensitive data, such as credit card information, that passes through the hosting server, and SSH (Secure Shell) access should be offered for secure communication between the hosting server and the computer that a client uses to access his web hosting account.

Do not sign up with a host that has a bad record when it comes to security. That ought to be obvious, but often isn't, considering the overwhelming number of hacking incidents that occur each year.

Disaster Recovery/Back-up

Disasters happen and cannot be entirely avoided. That is why it is essential that you understand a host's disaster recovery plan before entering into a contract. Make certain that they perform regular back-ups and/or have redundant servers.

Upgrades

Make sure that the contract with your host allows you to change plans and make upgrades. As your firm grows and law firm website trends change, you will want to add features such as podcasts and instructional videos.

Cancellation

There may come a point when you want to leave your host for another. You will want to know how much this will cost, what happens to your data, and how much notice you will have to give. This is especially true if you want to cancel before your contract is up. Like all companies with which you enter into long term contracts, web host providers can make it brutally difficult to cancel. It is best to know all this before signing up.

Conclusion

Thinking through and researching the legal considerations for picking a host for your law firm's website may not be as fun or glamorous as creating the website itself, but it is equally as important.

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There are as many hosting packages and hosting terms of agreements as there are hosts out there. It is very important to read these closely and understand them thoroughly because they will impact not only your law firm but your clients and potential clients as well.

It is far better to do your due diligence so that you and your clients can enjoy your website.

***Peter K. Suh** is a Law and Policy Analyst with the [University of Maryland Center for Health and Homeland Security](#) (CHHS) and is admitted to practice law in the state of Maryland. His work with the Center includes authoring emergency operations plans and public health emergency preparedness plans.*