

More Lawyers Offering Online Client Services Don't Get Left Behind

Lawyers who want to stay competitive in today's Web-driven marketplace need to find ways to serve their clients online now. The following menu of online client services can help.

Downloadable documents. The phrase "legal forms" is typed into Google™ more than 200,000 times each month, and the number of potential clients turning to "do it yourself" or inexpensive legal services like LegalZoom™ is increasing. However, alternative methods are available for lawyers to use (or enhance) similar services for clients. Document production, often coupled with commodity legal services like online incorporations, can be paired with secured online collaboration, questionnaires, and phone services to produce a more reliable product. Also, there is a growing movement in the legal profession to offer public-facing documents for free as a method to showcase lawyer expertise and to cut the lower-cost providers out of the market.

FAQs ("how to's") to common problems. In an effort to build credibility and expertise, some firms have experienced success with having FAQs available for free on their Web sites. Other firms have created secured Web sites to aggregate more sophisticated content. The concept of putting up a "garden wall" for these collections can have positive impacts in many ways, including pay-for-content collections and value-added memberships for a firm's existing (or best) clients.

Extranets and virtual deal rooms. Since the early 1990s, secured Web sites for use between clients and lawyers have been growing in popularity. Interestingly, this trend is being pushed by some clients as much as firms. Larger institutional clients are increasingly adding extranet or deal room requests into legal RFPs or creating their own. The problem with clients owning this virtual infrastructure is that firms are not in control of the Web site and it easily can be replaced. By contrast, firms that introduce these tools to their clients can create closer ties to them (but also sometimes more hurdles).

"Unbundled legal services" (limited retainers). One of the side effects for a large market device like the Web is the ability to break down legal engagement into smaller pieces. Unlike with niche practices, where lawyers can hang their shingle out and become an expert on coffee burns or E. coli poisoning, unbundling legal services means lawyers can execute only a portion of a legal matter's work.

"Back office" support, documents, "how to" guides. Once client names are redacted from a law firm's track record of work, the firm can offer certain documents collections as an online package for a value-added service to key clients or to corporate counsel as a method to reduce external firm reliance. This practice leverages the intellectual property of a lawyer or firm to generate a passive revenue stream. Many times, these document repositories also can be consolidated into best practice guides or model documents and repackaged for purchase or subscription services.

Online legal analysis. Many larger law firms have developed secured document-sharing and private-collaboration Web sites to showcase their best materials and best practices. Often integrating many types of online services, these Web sites can be sold on a subscription basis to a well-defined customer need or provided to firms' best clients. These types of collaborative Web sites also can be branded and marketed to demonstrate firms' expertise.

Advice on legal strategy. Advising could be the last bastion of lawyer services. Lawyers are advised to fit themselves into the "advice" or "strategy" role and to place themselves at the top of the food chain. As legal engagements become more and more fragmented, lawyers (or teams of lawyers) should be well paid to point the direction of each engagement. Advice or strategy also could be the role of the large law firm—one part project manager and one part trusted advisor.

Legal research. Legal researchers are in an excellent position to "go it alone" online as they fulfill an extremely important early-stage function for legal work. Lawyers with industry-focused legal research expertise can offer hourly-based services, such as drafting the traditional research memo or client reporting letters, with shorter turnaround times than law firms. Law firms, in turn, can outsource their legal research and charge research fees back to clients (disburse them) and if permitted by their ethics rules add a mark up to those services.

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Document/litigation management. Document review is another component of legal engagement that often is targeted for Legal Process Outsourcing (LPO), which is the practice of law firms hiring outside firms for legal services. Document management/ litigation management can be conducted, at least in part, online.

A virtual law office is not for everyone. However, brick-and-mortar law offices still can reap the benefits of the efficiencies that online client services offer if they are willing to invest a relatively small amount of time and resources.

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