



A lawyer goes online . . .

by Mary Dessypris

Are you a lawyer who wants a Web site, but doesn't want to shell out big bucks?

There is a way to have a simple, yet very appealing Internet presence without expensive bells and whistles.

Step One:

Before creating a Web page consider:

- Goals—What are you trying to accomplish?
- Audience—With whom are you trying to communicate?
- Content—What information will your site provide?
- Resources—How much time and money are needed to create your Web site, and how much time is needed for maintaining it?

Create the Web site to serve your firm. Have a clear purpose. Provide information about your firm and details about your services and areas of expertise. Offer free information about the Virginia legal system and your area of practice. Avoid legalese. Explain and define legal terms. Discuss process. The public is often unaware of due process and what it means. Discuss new legislation and how it affects your practice area.

Step Two:

Name your Web site. Register your Web address (domain name) so that no one else may use it. Fill out an on-line form and pay a small fee for a year or more of registration. Sites that offer domain registration include:

www.networksolutions.com

www.verio.com

www.register.com

www.newregistrars.com

You can also research other sites on your own through a search engine—subject: *register domain names*.

Step Three:

Research Web hosting possibilities. There is no reason to own a server in order to have a Web site. A number of companies offer Web site hosting services for a very small fee.

www.baymountain.com

www.register.com

www.verio.com

www.tophosts.com

Again, you can research this topic through a search engine—subject: *Web hosting*. Beware of sites that offer free Web hosting. They may add too much advertising to each page, which is distracting.

Step Four:

Obtain an FTP client (software, File Transfer Protocol) to transfer/send the pages to the host server. CuteFTP is available on-line at <http://www.globalscape.com>. Find more FTP programs at:

www.tucows.com

home.cnet.com

www.zdnet.com

Step Five:

Build the site.

Purchase software known as an “html editor.” If you are a purist, learn html, the coding language of the World Wide Web, to understand how a page is created. Sites that provide step-by-step lessons include:

<http://www.wigglebits.com/2-words.html>

<http://www.htmlgoodies.com/tutors/>

<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Web4Lib/RefCenter/lwmrcwebdev.html>

<http://werbach.com/barebones/>

For shortcuts, popular html editors are:

Authorware (Macromedia) <http://www.macromedia.com/software/authorware/>

Front Page (Microsoft) <http://www.microsoft.com/frontpage/>

DreamWeaver (Macromedia) <http://www.macromedia.com/software/dreamweaver/>

Homesite (Allaire) <http://www.allaire.com/products/homesite/index.cfm>

If you are familiar with Microsoft products, Front Page will be the easiest to learn. It uses the same commands and layout as MS Word. Front Page sometimes adds unnecessary coding.

You can hire a freelance Web designer to show you how to maintain the site once the initial layout is complete.

Contact West FirmSite at: <http://firmsites.findlaw.com/fsbasic.html> for options.

Outline

Once you have chosen software, create your Web site.

ISSUE	RESULT
What exactly are you trying to accomplish by creating a Web site?	Identify your goals.
With whom are you trying to communicate?	Identify your users. 1. The public at large 2. The business community
Decide content.	1. Information about your firm 2. In-depth research
Allocate the resources you will dedicate up front and over time to create and maintain your site.	Budget time and money

It is important to resolve these issues ahead of time. Once you answer these questions you will have a clear idea of what you are trying to accomplish by creating a Web site. Once this is resolved you can forge ahead.

Organizational chart

Good organization is key to building an effective Web site. Organize content into clear sections and subsections. The content of the sections should be reflected in their titles. Create an organizational chart of the Web site. It will help you visualize the site as a whole and arrange the information in a logical follow-up scheme. (See chart on following page.)

Navigation

Navigation is the road map to your site. A good navigational scheme is essential to a well organized Web site. Establish a home page. Getting around the Web site should not be guesswork. Make it easy on your audience. A variety of navigational aids and Web elements help visitors find what they are looking

for and get there quickly. Use more than one navigational system if you can. Be consistent throughout the site. Create a template that you will use with minimal changes.

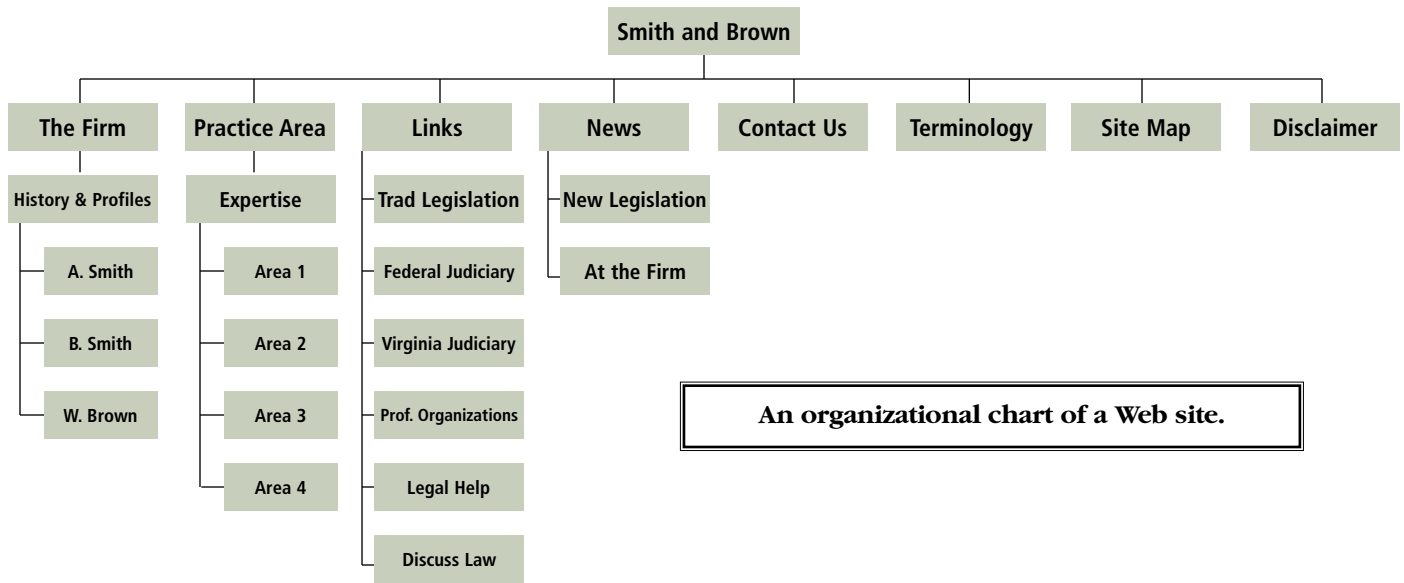
Go for a simple, classic and elegant look, which reinforces professional standards and credible, reassuring qualities. Do not be impressed by moving or flashing signs. They take a long time to load and become annoying. Web surfers are notoriously impatient. If your site does not load within 30 or 40 seconds, the viewer will leave for other pastures.

- Create a consistent navigational interface seen from every page. Set navigation on each page (usually on the side and/or at the bottom of each page). Navigational tools are: left/top/bottom bar or panel buttons, embedded links, breadcrumb trail, site map or an index if the site is large.
- Create a clear path on each page to follow so that users know: Where they are, where they can go, and how to get back to the previous page or to the main/home page.
- Comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by having a site map in text along with illustrations and give a name to each picture by using the ALT tabs. Visit the Bobby site (<http://www.cast.org/bobby/>) to learn how to make the site ADA compliant.
- Use pictures or illustrations, but do not overdo it.
- Stick to clear, concise labels.

Content

Make the Web site worth visiting. On the first page include:

- Name of the firm, full address, telephone and fax numbers
- Office hours and holiday schedule
- Generic e-mail address
- Staff listing and expertise, along with e-mail addresses
- An overview of the firm, attorneys' profiles, the years in practice and the services provided are good advertising tools.
- Practice areas: Stress what makes you unique and/or well qualified.
- Create a page for useful links including:
 - Links to the Virginia Supreme Court and to the Virginia courts
 - Links to major legal portals such as Findlaw and The Virtual Chase
 - General legal information depending on the area of expertise of the firm
- Contact information and feedback
 - Place an on-line form that will allow clients to get in touch with you.
 - Place a map to your office or write directions.
 - Encourage the audience to write to you for information or feedback.
- Index or site map (an alphabetical listing of all the pages of your Web site)
- Policies and disclaimer



Provide accurate and updated information. Make your site comprehensive. Depth of content, clear explanations, and a page that addresses common legal concerns, such as frequently asked questions, will ensure return visits. Create and maintain useful links. Make sure that the links are not broken and that they go to the correct page. Divide your links into different topics and provide a short annotation with each link, describing the site or page it goes to. Link to search engines, professional associations, legal sites, and courts directories. Some examples are:

Track Legislation

Thomas (<http://thomas.loc.gov>)

Legislative Information System (LIS) (<http://leg1.state.va.us/lis.htm>)

The Virginia Judiciary

Virginia's Court Publications
(<http://www.courts.state.va.us/brochure.htm>)

Virginia Judicial System (<http://www.courts.state.va.us/>)

Virginia Courts (<http://www.courts.net/va/index.html>)

Municode-municipal codes online (<http://www.municode.com/>)

Federal Judiciary

U.S. Judicial Branch Resources (Library of Congress)
(<http://lcweb.loc.gov/global/judiciary.html>)

U.S. Supreme Court (<http://www.supremecourt.gov>)

United States Court of Appeals (www.fedcir.gov)

Courts.net (<http://www.courts.net>)

Professional Organizations

Virginia State Bar (<http://www.vsb.org/>)

The Virginia Bar Association (<http://www.vba.org>)

American Bar Association (<http://www.abanet.org/>)

The Bar Association of the City of Richmond
(<http://www.richmondbar.org>)

Legal Help on the Web

Guide to Law online (Library of Congress)
(<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/glin/worldlaw.html>)

Findlaw (www.findlaw.com)

The VirtualChase (<http://www.virtualchase.com>)

FreeAdvice (<http://freeadvice.com/>)

Nolo (<http://www.nolo.com/>)

My counsel.com (<http://mycounsel.com/app/consumers/library.asp>)

LawyersExpress.com (<http://www.lawyerexpress.com/>)

State government and/or city/county or regional pages

Create a page to discuss issues and legal process in your practice area.

People are generally aware that certain services are available on the Web. However, they do not know how to access that information. Be a facilitator.

Presentation

Practice aesthetic and minimalist design. Choose colors that reflect your personality. Do not use odd color combinations and very light colored letters on dark backgrounds. (An exception to this rule is the side /navigational bar, which is usually darker to attract attention.) Choose soothing colors and graphics like those on your firm's letterhead and business cards. Use the Web site to portray your firm in print. Visit other sites for hints on how to develop your Web site and get ideas for color schemes.

When you design your Web pages, be aware that your page won't look the same to all visitors. Consider the different browsers, monitor sizes, screen resolutions and typefaces. HTML is by nature a structural language, not a page layout program. It

will display differently depending on the settings on each computer. The simpler the page, the better it will look.

Do not create lengthy Web pages. People are turned off if they have to scroll to read a lengthy text. Create subtopics. Place key information on the top of the page. People often forget to scroll and often miss crucial information. Keep paragraphs short and separate them with a blank line. To attract attention to a concept, bold a phrase or even give a different color hue to a word or phrase.

Check and recheck for spelling errors and correct grammar. Have colleagues and friends, unrelated to your profession, look at the site for clarity, consistency and ease of navigation.

Try it from different computers (i.e., lap tops, Macs), different browsers (Netscape, Explorer, Web TV), in-house and from home (different speed of lines). Try printing from different computers.

Conclusion

You can create a simple appealing Web site at a minimal cost.

- Be consistent throughout the site.
- Make actions and options intuitive.
- Provide clear navigation.
- Your Web site is never finished.
WWW format = always needs updating.
- Once the site goes live, submit the URL to various search engines. Most search engines have a submission link.
- Advertise your Web site by placing it on your letterhead, the publications you create and in the advertisements you place on the local paper or on television. ♪

Further reading:

<http://www.efuse.com/>

<http://webdesign.about.com/compute/webdesign/>

<http://www.wigglebits.com/2-words.html>

<http://www.stars.com/Authoring/Style/Sheets/>

<http://info.med.yale.edu/caim/manual/>

<http://www.oreilly.com/> (This Web site has a collection of some of the best books available on computers and Web design.)



Mary Dessypris graduated from the University of Athens, Greece, with a B.A. in history and archaeology. In 1975, she came with her husband to the U.S. She completed her graduate work at Vanderbilt University and received an M.A. in Art History 1985, and an M.L.S. in 1986.

Upon graduation, she joined the Tennessee State Library and Archives as a reference librarian. In 1992, she moved to Virginia and in 1993, began working at the Library of Virginia. Since 1995, she is the government reference services and outreach coordinator for LVA. In this capacity, Dessypris is the liaison of the Library with state agency libraries, state agencies and the General Assembly. She has developed and teaches Internet classes to state agency and public library staff.