

## Seven Preparation Steps to a New Web Site for Your Firm

by Nancy Hoffman & Judy Smith (right)



The Internet has grown to be *the* essential marketing tool for law firms. So when the firm management decides to redo the Web site, it strikes fear into the hearts of the best marketing professionals. With so much at stake, both financially and in terms of potential clients, you can't afford to make mistakes.

Preparation, research and development in advance of the Web site implementation is essential for keeping within your budget and ahead of your deadline. Here is a helpful checklist of preparation activities that will make the entire process smoother and more successful.

### 1) Identify Your Decision Team

A Web site cannot be built on 100 percent consensus. It is imperative to choose a small but comprehensive committee that represents various segments of the entire firm: partners, associates, practice groups, offices and administrative areas. The committee should be responsible for the critical decisions about the site's function and format, with one person who is designated as the final decision maker.

Connolly Bove is a firm of approximately 100 attorneys; we have two practice groups—intellectual property and business law. Our internal Web site committee consisted of seven attorneys, an IT representative and the marketing staff. Each of the seven attorneys represented a specific population of the entire pool of attorneys, thus serving as the voice of their colleagues. Our Web site committee designated a partner that serves on the firm's marketing committee to be the committee's leader, because the individual already has a sound understanding of all internal marketing programs.

### 2) Understand Your Target Audience

Who is your most important audience for your Web site? What are their concerns? What do they need from your Web site? What do you want them to learn when they come to your Web site? What makes you different from your competitors? What is your differentiation statement? What are your key critical messages? How do you want to be known in five or 10 years?

Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are not easy. If you haven't done this homework with your current and potential clients, do it before you begin the process of redesigning your site. This will take considerable amount of time but the payback is immense because it will certainly assist all your future marketing efforts.

The screenshot shows the website for Connolly Bove Lodge & Hutz LLP, Attorneys at Law. The header includes the firm name and a search bar. The navigation menu includes Home, Practices, Attorneys, News, About Us, Offices, and Careers. The main content area features a dropdown menu for 'Practices' with sub-menus for 'Business Savvy', 'Banking and Financial', 'Business Litigation', 'Business Planning', 'Commercial Bankruptcy and Creditors' Rights', 'Commercial Real Estate', 'Corporate Law', 'Delaware Alternative Entities', and 'Other Business Law'. A map of Wilmington, DE is displayed, showing the location of the firm's office. Below the map, there is a text box providing directions to the office from Philadelphia and from Route 202.

Smith Asbury, Inc., the agency that handles Connolly Bove's general public relations and other strategic marketing activities, developed a list of questions. We submitted them to a group of 50 attorneys, who were encouraged to respond via email or were interviewed for 10–15 minutes. This additional interview step ensured that the firm was aligned on the defined target audience and their needs and concerns.

### 3) Organize the Firm for the Web Site User

How should you present your firm on the Internet so that users can find what they need quickly and efficiently?

For Connolly Bove, the most important Web users are other attorneys and potential clients. Both need quick access to the firm's expertise in specific practice areas, representative cases, attorney biographies and related news.

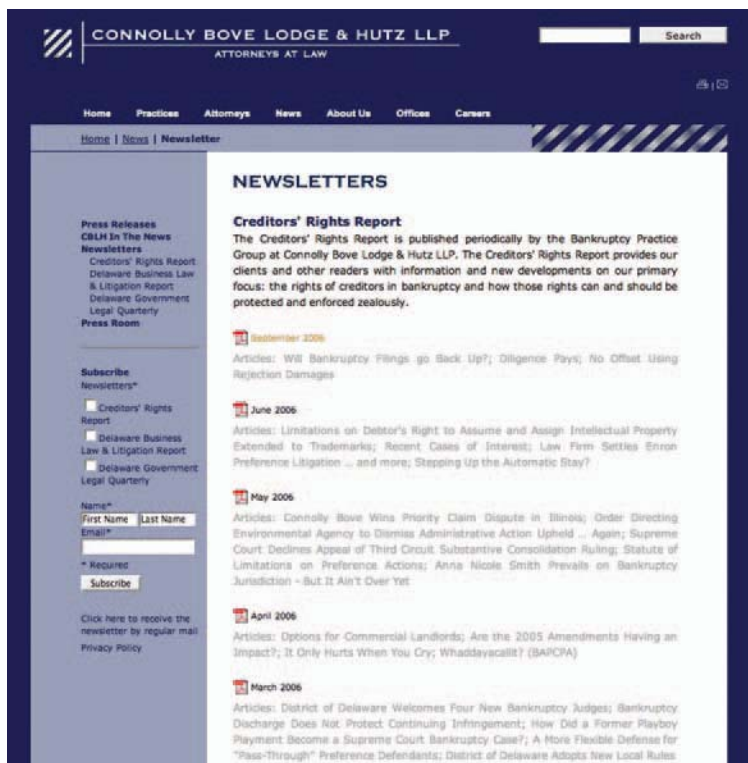
The firm used this opportunity to re-organize its internal practice group structure. Keeping the audiences in mind and with additional national and local market research, the firm examined more appropriate practice area titles and structuring methods. The re-organization optimized the site for a faster and better understanding of core expertise.

Navigation buttons should be designed to streamline the most important functions and provide a logical structure for users to follow.

Effective communications do not try and tell everything all at once—choose the most important information to deliver up front.

### 4) Interactivity and Innovation

The Internet is a two-way communication tool. However, most still view it and use it as a one-way or “push” communication, much like an ad or a brochure. This does not maximize its total utilization.



Consider ways that you can interact with the Web user. Some easy ways to get users to interact with your site include providing newsletter or event signups and an RSS feed for a blog or news. New, exciting interactive tools are being developed every day, each adding a layer of complexity to a Web site. This is a good area for innovation. Think outside the box. A great place to begin implementing such features is generally in the recruiting section of the site.

For the Connolly Bove site, our interaction is limited at this time to online newsletter sign-ups and direct email access. However, we have built in the capacity to do additional interaction in the future. Remember, your site is an active marketing instrument and should be updated frequently.

### 5) Software and Hosting Decisions

It is unlikely that users will ever notice the quality of your Web site hosting and development software, but they will surely be turned away when these don't function properly. Good hosting and development platforms also make the administration of your site easier, saving you both time and money.

Look for a host that guarantees at least 99.9 percent up time and also provides quality customer service. If your Web site goes down for any reason, you want a person you can call 24/7, someone to take responsibility in making things right again.

All Web sites are built around a common language, HTML. However, a variety of other scripting and coding languages and databases enhance the functionality of HTML. Be sure that the programmers developing your site are well versed in scripting that functions equally well across all common browsers.

Today's sophisticated Web sites are more and more a central gathering place for all kinds of company data. Content management systems (CMS) for Web sites allow you to easily access related information, as well as to make changes and updates to your site through a user-friendly interface. Your CMS platform should be popular enough that it won't be discontinued, and so that there are plenty of programmers with knowledge of the system and language, in case you no longer work with your original Web developer.

### 6) Hiring Help

Now that you've gone through your internal preparation, you'll have a much better idea of who you need to hire to develop your Web site.

Important things to consider next include: Do you want a marketing agency that has experience in Web design, or a dedicated Web design firm? If you feel confident that you know the content, function and organization you'll need for your new site, a Web design firm may execute the design for you at less cost.

When Connolly Bove decided to redesign its site, the firm interviewed various vendors and agencies who provide Web site design and in the end chose Smith Asbury. Most marketing agencies will bring their strategic marketing perspective to your Web project, helping to shape and implement both the image and brand of your firm throughout the site.

Separately, you may also want to consider hiring a writer to write attorney bios and other Web copy; it is a reasonable investment to consider during the early stages of your Web redesign project.

## 7) How Will You Update Your Site and Keep It Refreshed?

Fresh, quality content makes your Web site more useful and interesting to your users, and it plays a major role in search engine optimization. Make sure whatever vendor you decide to hire to assist with this project is knowledgeable about search engine optimization, which changes as search engines continuously rewrite their complex algorithms.

For many firms, this need for providing fresh content looms as a huge burden. Attorneys who use every moment for billable work find little “free” time to write opinion pieces, formal articles or case studies. However, there are options that can take only a few moments a week, such as a blog that lists

recent cases or articles from others, along with a brief comment and a link to the case or article.

It is important to identify which portions of the site need to be regularly updated, and an uncomplicated method to execute updates. A user-friendly “admin panel” can be built into site design that will make the updates easy for admin staff with little or no knowledge of HTML coding, and pose no danger to the integrity of the site.

Time is of critical importance in a law firm. It was extremely important to Connolly Bove to be able to make its own Web updates at any given time. The admin staff can edit much of the site content on their own, including attorney profiles, news, representative cases, newsletters and employment listings. ■

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