

# **Building the Client-Centered Website – What You Need to Know (and Do) to Turn Your Website into a Client Development Machine**

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## **Building the Client-Centered Website – What You Need to Know (and Do) to Turn Your Website into a Client Development Machine**

Historically, law firm websites consisted of a collection of practice areas and attorney profiles, sprinkled with firm and attorney accolades (such as awards won and presentations given). “Practice areas” were written in a manner that was readily understood by other lawyers, but often not by those whom the firm was serving.

Website home pages tended to be text-heavy, and often were presented almost as a brief in why the firm was the best choice available. Seemingly the message to potential clients was “if you just understand that our lawyers went to better law schools, were on law journal, and that we speak at more presentations and have won more honors, than you’ll understand why we are the best firm for you.”

But is this how clients choose a law firm and a lawyer? Do they engage in some type of quantitative analysis to determine the “best” lawyer? Or is another approach more effective?

### ***Why the Traditional Website is Usually Not Optimal***

This historical approach for law firm website development (the “Traditional Approach”) is discussed below. The Traditional Website is usually not optimal because it is focused primarily on the firm and its attorneys (rather than on clients), and because the layout and presentation are done in a manner that does not resonate with clients.

This paper discusses a better alternative to the Traditional Approach – which is referred to as The Client-Centered Website Approach – and how law firms can take advantage of this format to better develop clients.

**The key to turning your website into a client generation machine is to connect with clients around the information that THEY think is the most important about THEIR matter, not the information that YOU think is important about YOU or YOUR FIRM.**

Some of the areas described below. It may not feel comfortable to about changing from long, descriptive passages about your firm to short, concise messages focused on client needs. If you’re like many lawyers, you will want to fill nice white open spaces on your website with more text. Resist this urge.

### **The Traditional Law Firm Website**

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#### ***Focus of the Traditional Approach***

As noted above, the Traditional Approach is centered on promoting the firm and its attorneys through:

- awards,
- speaking engagements,
- legal articles authored,
- appointments to committees in legal associations, and
- educational achievements

The underlying theme of the Traditional Website seems to be that “you should be impressed with our credentials (which are better than the firm down the street), and therefore you should want to hire us.”

But are superior credentials the reason that firms get hired? Or are clients more concerned with how a firm and its attorneys will serve their needs?

### ***Putting Clients First***

Potential clients want to know how you are going to help them. They want to know that you will put their interests first, particularly before any incentives that you or your firm may have to undertake additional work and increase legal fees. They want to know that you will work tirelessly in seeking to obtain for them the best result possible.

When a law firm’s website is focused on accolades such as the ones mentioned above, clients likely will not infer that the firm truly cares about their interests. Instead, based on the information presented, they may infer something entirely different – that they are simply a revenue source for the firm.

Obviously this is not the message that most firms want to convey. The section below about the Client-Centered Website provides guidance as to how this can be avoided.

Before proceeding, it’s important to understand that key credentials (including those noted above) **should not** be omitted. Instead, for most law firm websites, an increased emphasis should be placed on how the firm and its attorneys serve the needs of clients, and a decreased emphasis should be placed on firm and attorney accolades.

### **Remember, it’s all about me (your client).**

#### ***The Purpose of the Home Page***

The home page of a website is critical, but not for the reasons formerly believed. Previously, website owners were coached to put as much information as possible “above the fold” – the area that could be seen on a typical computer without any scrolling. As a result, unique ways were invented to cram as much information as possible above the fold.

When there was too much information about a firm to be included “above the fold,” this information was simply added below the fold. In some cases, it was as though a law firm website owner was told that he or she must add every bit of information about the firm onto the home page. (In one case, I saw a website where the “page down” button had to be clicked 13 times before reaching the bottom of the page).

The purpose of the home page is not about providing vast amounts of detailed information about a firm, **it’s about providing resonance so that the firm will “feel” right for prospective clients so that they will want to learn more about the firm.**

It’s important to understand that users typically give a website 3-14 seconds to resonate. Within this very short time period, they make a decision either to continue learning about a firm, or they click the “back” button on their browser and go back to Google to their search results list and look for another law firm. In this short period of time, resonance must be achieved through:

- A clean layout using good colors and fonts
- Compelling imagery
- Key messages that speak to user needs

Long text on the home page will not help create resonance; if fact, it is much more likely to backfire, as users don’t want to be overwhelmed with a lot of text.

### ***Use of Imagery and Text***

The Traditional Approach also is focused heavily on the significant use of text, explanations, and legal discussions. Traditional Approach home pages in particular tend to have long discussions using small text that often requires considerable scrolling to reach the bottom of the page.

Instead of being able to digest information quickly (in less than one minute), it might take an average user 5-10 minutes or more to read and comprehend the information on the home page (particularly when technical information is included).

Little imagery is typically used on the home page of Traditional Websites. While there may be images of court columns or scales of justice, these images are largely meaningless to potential clients because they don’t provide useful information about how the attorney will serve client needs. Moreover, such images do not resonate with clients, as they are images of the legal profession (not the professions or occupations of clients).

**Website users want to be able to quickly assimilate information quickly**, which can (and should) be done through key messages and imagery. They want to be able to scan and understand a web page in seconds, particularly the home page of a website. When they are asked to assimilate information and messages through long text passages, a sense of frustration can result, which can lead to website abandonment as users search for another law firm website that will not cause such frustration.

Website users are open to reading detailed information about their legal matter; however, this information should be presented on the “inner” pages of a website, **not** on the home page.

The home page of a website should be much like the home page of a magazine – limited text, great imagery, and promises and links that speak to the needs of clients so that they will be encouraged to find out more information.

### ***Practice Advice***

- Keep your home page concise, or you risk engendering user frustration.
- If a person with a high school education cannot scan and understand the information presented on the home page in less than a minute, the home page should be simplified.
- Use large images and key messages – users will be able to more easily assimilate information presented in this format.
- Understand that some users will be interested in detailed information; this is fine if it is included on a page other than your home page.

## **The Client-Centered Website**

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It's All About Me - Your Client (Sound Familiar?)

As a starting point to break away from the Traditional Law Firm Website Approach, put yourself in the minds of clients – what are they looking for?

### ***What Information Do (Almost) All Clients Seek?***

Virtually all clients want to know the following information before making the hiring decision:

1. **What will you do for me?** Exactly how will you help me with my matter or case?
2. **Fees** - How much will your services cost?
3. **Trust** – will you put my interests before yours?
4. **Expertise & Experience** - Do you have what I need to get a good result?
5. **Testimonials and Referrals** - Do other people like me have good things to say about you?
6. **Care** - Do you truly care about me, and will you work hard to try to get me a good result?

As an example, let's consider that an attorney believes that trust is an important attribute that potential clients want to see. How can trust be conveyed through a website (other than explicitly stating "you can trust me")?

First, the attorney's picture should be on the website. Surprisingly, there are many websites where the attorney's image is not included anywhere on the firm's website. This brings up a question – how can potential clients trust you if they don't even know what you look like?

Second, client testimonials can be used, if permissible under ethics rules. These testimonials don't necessarily need to focus on the **result** obtained; rather they instead be focused on controllable aspects of how services were delivered. A testimonial could highlight your availability, your tenacious representation, your ability to develop effectively legal strategy.

Third, in addition to an attorney "headshot," other images can be shown of the attorney interacting with clients (these images can be taken so that the "client" is not readily identifiable, if this is a concern). Such images would also tend to promote trust.

### **Exercise –**

Create a list of the key aspects that you believe almost all of your potential clients are looking for when choosing an attorney. Then compare this list with your website. Are the items on your list being conveyed on your website?

### ***Focusing Your Website on Those Who Will Be Influential in the Hiring Decision***

Often, there others who are influential in the hiring decision beyond clients. Here are two examples of people who may play a key role in influencing the hiring decision, and how you can target your website in part to resonate with these people.

#### **Lawyers Who Receive Most of their Business from the Recommendations of Other Attorneys**

Lawyers who receive most of their business as the result of recommendations from other attorneys will want to focus on the items that will be the most likely to resonate with other attorneys, rather than the ultimate client.

As an example, an appellate lawyer may receive referrals from attorneys who practice criminal, commercial litigation, divorce, and personal injury law. The clients of these attorneys may not understand much about what is involved in a successful appellate law practice. If the appellate lawyer's cases come entirely from attorney referrals, it will be much more productive to market to attorneys, rather than directly to those who are seeking to have a criminal conviction overturned.

In this example, prestigious awards, lists of cases won, other significant legal achievements, a distinguished educational background, and selection to prominent committees in legal organizations may resonate well with referring attorneys.

### Lawyers Hired as a Result of the Influence of a Client Family Member

With some practices, family members of a client often have a significant influence over which attorney hired, particularly if the family member is the one who is paying the legal fees. As an example,

- Grandparents may have a significant influence in the hiring decision over which attorney is retained to represent a son or daughter in a custody dispute involving grandchildren.
- Parents (particularly mothers) may have a significant influence in the hiring decision when a son or daughter is charged with a crime, such as DUI or a drug crime.

How should you adjust the focus of your website in these situations?

First, target at least a portion of your website messages and imagery to the influential family members. With respect to the two examples above, an attorney could do the following:

- In the case of grandparents paying the legal bills for a custody matter – Include imagery showing grandchildren with their parents and grandparents and promoting how important the family unit is, and how the attorney will work tirelessly to obtain fair custody rights and parenting time.
- In the case of parents paying the legal bills for a son or daughter charged with a crime – develop and promote messages about the negative ramifications that will result for future hiring and other consequences as the result of a conviction.
- In both cases, the attorney should promote an understanding and genuine caring about the difficult circumstances that are involved.

### **Your Practice**

If someone other than a client is primarily responsible for the hiring decision, complete the following:

- Who is (are) the most influential in making the hiring decision?  

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- How can I focus my website on aspects that will resonate with them?

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### ***Should Fees Be Discussed on a Website, and If So, How Should They Be Discussed?***

Most clients are concerned about fees. If you omit any discussion about fees, clients may have the impression that you are not concerned about managing fees within their budget or expectations.

Instead of omitting fees, law firms can do the following on their website:

- Specifically state that they understand that clients are naturally interested in the cost of their matter,
- Invite clients to talk to the lawyers at any time if they have any concerns at all about legal fees,
- Promise that legal fees will be discussed before significant work is undertaken,
- Discuss whether a retainer will be required, and if so, the general nature upon which the retainer will be based, and
- Note if the law firm accepts credit card payments.

By not making mention of legal fees, a law firm may risk conveying the perception that it does not care about a client's concern regarding legal fees. Worse yet, it might convey the perception that it will likely do whatever it can to increase legal fees.

### **Structuring Content to Create Resonance and New Client Development**

As noted above, it's important to understand that when searching for a product or service on the Internet, users tend to give a website about 3-14 seconds in which to resonate. During this period one of two decisions is made:

- Users believe that the website will have the information that they are looking for, in which case they will choose to invest additional time on the website learning about the products and services offered, or
- The website will not resonate with users, in which case they will click the "back" button on their browser, and then click on a link to another website on Google's search results list.

14 seconds is not sufficient time to create a favorable resonance with potential clients through detailed text explanations. It is, however, enough time to create a favorable resonance through imagery, design layout, and key messages.

What should you do to increase the chance that they will choose to stay under website and learn about you and the services offered by your firm?

- Understand that the **purpose** of the **home page** is to create **immediate resonance**. This is done by creating a Web 2.0 website (described next).
- Create large images and messages, much like those on the cover of a magazine.
  - The images should speak to clients and their needs.
  - The messages should be short and speak to either client needs or how you help them with their legal matters.
  - These images and messages should take up considerable space “above the fold.”

## Web 2.0 Websites

Web 2.0 websites typically have the following characteristics:

- They typically have a white or very light-colored background,
- They use a simple and elegant design, without a lot of distracting and heavy artwork,
- They are focused on resonance and conveying key messages first, and
- Text is kept to a minimum.

## **Why Are Web 2.0 Websites Effective?**

The major e-commerce sites have likely spent millions of dollars in website marketing trying to maximize purchases. If some of these websites are examined (such as [www.bestbuy.com](http://www.bestbuy.com), [www.target.com](http://www.target.com), and [www.walmart.com](http://www.walmart.com)), there are many similarities:

- They are all on white colored backgrounds
- The navigation is simple without too many top-level links
- They have large images of products
- They use simple messages, often in varying font types and sizes

- There is very little text used, other than category/product items and a simple messages about the product that serve as a call to action or other promotion.

All of these websites look as though they could have been designed by the same person (although this probably was not the case). Why do these sites look so similar? Couldn't these companies have hired someone to design a much more unique site?

Likely through millions of dollars of A/B testing, these companies all arrived at the same conclusions – design around the items noted above leads to the most sales. What law firms can learn is that less is often more effective.

### **Exercise –**

If you were limited to 100 words or less on the home page of your website, how would you convey the High Value Information and create the most resonance with potential clients? With limited text, it might be preferable to switch to short messages and images, much like the stores mentioned above.

### **New Trends in Website Design**

Two new trends website design are the following:

- The use of very large images on the home page with key messages. These images now frequently take up the entire “above the fold” space on a 14” monitor. Simple, focused messages are included to develop resonance.
- The home page “story.” An alternative to using short home pages (where little or no scrolling is required), is exactly the opposite – using longer home where a fair amount of scrolling is required. This approach makes use of horizontal “sections” in which each “section” is typically focused on one message.

Despite the seemingly contradictory nature between these two approaches, in reality they are very much the same in that they present simple, focused messages, rather than relying on long text.

These longer pages are **not** a return to the historical long pages of Traditional Websites, which instead included lots of text and a little emphasis on client resonance.

### ***Practice Advice***

For your home page,

- Keep your website simple and uncluttered, especially your home page

- Focus on creating resonance
- Develop messages that speak to client needs and how you help them
- Highlight and promote items that are likely going to be influential in the hiring decision

## **Client-Centered Attorney Profiles**

Attorney bios in the Traditional Approach frequently convey little, if any, High Level Information. In many cases, they are downright boring.

### **A Bio Is NOT a Resume; It's Your Opportunity to Make a Pitch to Potential Clients and Explain How You Help Them**

Consider your bio your place for an elevator pitch, but having the ability to add more detail. Consider that you are a veteran corporate lawyer, and a potential client asks you (in person) why their company should use you. You might say something like this:

I serve the legal needs of entrepreneurs, small business owners, and larger companies in the areas of general business law, contracts, leasing and real estate transactions, shareholder and owner matters.

I serve clients by providing proactive advice, I help clients minimize litigation risk in their daily operations, and I provide advice and counsel in response to immediate client needs concerning transactions and potential litigation matters. I help structure, draft, and negotiate on behalf of clients in a wide variety of transactional matters, including those relating to general business operations, employees, and contractors. I also help clients expand their businesses through providing legal counsel in connection with acquisitions, financings, and leasing.

You probably would not give an answer like this:

Twenty years ago, I graduated with honors from Distinguished University School of Law, where I was a member of law review. I won awards for getting the top grades in two classes. Prior to law school I was a political science major at State University.

Following law school I clerked for a judge. Since then, I've written many papers on legal on a variety of legal matters. I am currently active in several bar associations and other organizations. I am a member and the practice leader of our firm's business law group, and a member of our firm's real estate law group.

A comparison of the first and second examples shows the following:

- The first example is focused on how the attorney serves the needs of clients. The second example mentions that the attorney is part of two practice groups, but for non-attorneys, it is probably not clear what the attorney does to help clients with their legal needs.
- In the first example, the attorney profile speaks to the questions relating to the questions that clients are going to have – how are you going to help me?
- The second example is focused on historical activities of the lawyer that do not provide any information about how the lawyer will help serve client needs. **While historical and biographical information should be included on profile pages, such information should not be the main area of focus.**
- Both of the profiles have one thing in common – they are both written in the first person voice. While this is not a necessity, consideration should be given to writing at least some of the profile in the first person voice. This will help humanize the attorney, and better establish the connection between the attorney and clients.

## **Practice Advice**

### **The “How does this benefit clients?” Question**

One way to help determine the relevance of content is to write the information, and then ask “How does this benefit clients?” If there is no logical benefit, the information should likely be de-emphasized or omitted.

Here are two examples –

**“I won awards for achieving the highest grade in two classes in law school.”**

Here, there is no connection between this information and how clients will benefit other than perhaps very tangential conclusion that the attorney perhaps studied hard and thus was able to achieve a higher grade than classmates.

**“I have helped more than 1,000 clients with their estate plans.”**

While this statement may be self-serving, it’s likely clear that clients will benefit because the attorney has substantial experience in estate planning.

## **Practice Area Descriptions**

Practice area descriptions should follow the same principles used in drafting attorney bios. Speak to the needs of clients and how the attorneys in the practice area serve such needs. Don’t

expect that clients will necessarily know what the attorneys in different practice areas do – in all likelihood, they probably will only have a very basic understanding of how lawyers serve clients.

### **Practice Advice – Final Points**

- Your website is your key marketing center. It is the focus for current clients, future clients, public relations communications, competitive differentiation, employee recruitment, and much more.
  - Spend the time and money to do your website well. Really well. It will pay off.
- Like your other marketing efforts, your website is not something that is done one day and then forgotten about for several years.
  - Update your website frequently with news, events, and client victories (to the extent you ethically can do so)
- **Blog frequently**
  - Promote key news of your business clients – they will appreciate your commitment to their success.