

How to Set Up a Law Practice Website

By John Cushman

Having a website today is as important as having a Yellow Pages listing was 20 years ago; even if your clients don't find you that way, it's one of the tools they'll use to make sure you're legitimate. This article describes how to get started with a simple website, regardless of your time and money limitations.

The Basic Building Blocks of Any Website

Let's start by covering the basic building blocks of every website, from the simplest site to Amazon.com. If you're not very technically inclined, don't worry—you might not have to know all of this. You can hire someone else to do it or you can use a hosted CMS, which we'll get into below. In any event, this is a good way to understand some of the major concepts involved in building a website.

Domain Name Registration

Domain name registration is the process of buying a domain name for your website. It's what translates a domain name like "sswg.com" into an IP address like "199.239.225.223" that a computer can use to contact a web server.

It's good to buy a straightforward, professional domain like "SmithLaw.com" that uses the preferred ".com" rather than ".net," ".biz," and so on. You can also have multiple or extra domains that point to the same site, like "ImmigrationAppeals.com" or "MichiganLawyer.com"—if no one has taken them first.

Domain name registration is as simple as visiting a registration website, indicating the domain name you want, and providing your credit card information. It costs about \$10 a year.

It's a good idea to register your domain right away, even if you're not quite ready to put up a website. If you don't own your domain yet, you should get it now. Really, I'll wait...

There are, in fact, a number of options for registering your domain name, including NameCheap, DynaDot, and Moniker. GoDaddy is popular, but not recommended; the dollar or two in yearly savings isn't worth the loss of customer service.

If you want to find out whether someone has already taken your brilliantly catchy name or if you can't come up with a brilliantly catchy domain name on your own, there are some good search and brainstorming sites, including InstantDomainSearch, NameStation, and BustAName.

Web Hosting

The second basic building block of any website is finding a web server to host your files.

A web server is simply a computer on the Internet with a reliable IP address. With the right software and Internet connection, any computer could be a web server. That's much too much hassle, though. Instead, you'll want to rent space on a server from a web host. At the low end, that costs about \$5 a month.

I can't recommend a particular web host, but there are plenty of review sites out there with recommendations, including WebHostingReviews, BestHostRating, and WebHostingTalk, the last of which is a forum.

You'll want a web host that supports PHP and MySQL (practically all of them do) in case you decide to install WordPress.

Once you have a web host, you'll have a place to copy HTML files so they'll be displayed to anyone who visits your domain name. That brings us to the third building block.

Website Design

The last building block of a website is the site itself—a bunch of text files and images in formats like HTML, CSS, and Javascript. The grand mystery of the Internet can be

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reduced to this: someone types in your domain name, it gets translated to the IP address of your web server, and the text files are sent from your web server to the user and displayed in the user's browser.

You can see what the HTML files look like for any website by right-clicking on any Internet page and choosing "View Source." Learning how to write those files is far beyond the scope of this piece (we'll talk about alternatives next), but if you wanted to learn, W3Schools would be a good place to start.

Getting Your Website Online

Now you know what a website *is*, but how do you create *yours*?

If you can afford it, the easiest way to create a website is to hire someone else to do it for you. What you'll probably want them to give you is a customized version of WordPress, which began as blogging software but has become something much more. With WordPress as your platform, your designer can give you exactly the look you want but also let you edit the text and add pages yourself, without having to understand the design elements. A basic site could cost a few thousand dollars or more, depending on the experience of the designer. Ask to see samples of the designer's work, and find someone whose work you like.

If you can't afford to hire a designer, WordPress is still a good option—if you have some computer skills. You'll have to register your own domain name and find a web host, then follow the instructions at WordPress.org to install and customize the site yourself. WordPress offers thousands of pre-packaged themes submitted by users, so you'll be able to find something that looks great without doing a lot of extra work.

If you don't have a lot of money or time to learn technical skills, a final option is a hosted content management system (CMS). A hosted CMS is a website that lets you make a website at your own domain name without learning web design. This option gives you less control over your site than WordPress, but it's the easiest option available. Instead of renting space on a web host and uploading files, you create an account at a website, use a graphic tool to design your site, and instantly see it up and running.

Some hosts also provide the first step, offering to register a domain for you. *Don't do it!* Register your domain yourself so you can change providers later, if necessary.

A good, low-cost, hosted CMS is Yola—it's free to start and costs \$30 a year once you set it up to use a custom domain name without advertising. If you can afford a little more, Squarespace will give you more

control over the look and feel of your site for \$14 a month.

Important Ancillary Considerations

Handling E-mail

Whether you use your own web host or a hosted CMS, you'll need to be able to

Think about what you want visitors to your site to do: Call you or e-mail you? Sign up for your blog? Recommend you to friends? Everything on your site should be designed to serve a purpose you have previously established.

send e-mail from you@yourdomain.com. (Sending e-mail from you@gmail.com is just not professional.) Rather than running your own e-mail system, I recommend using Google Apps for Business, a service Google offers to businesses to allow them to use Gmail-style software to handle internal e-mail. The standard version is free; versions with additional features cost extra. By following Google's instructions to set the MX record at your domain registrar, you can send and receive e-mail at your domain using the familiar Gmail web interface or any desktop client.

How Should Your Website Look?

No matter how you're creating your website, you'll need to have some idea about how you want it to look. The best way to start is by researching your competitors' sites and seeing what you like or dislike about their choices. What kinds of colors do they use? What kinds of images? What kinds of fonts?

If you're hiring a web designer, that's all you need to know. If you're designing your website yourself, there are a few simple rules for making it look good:

- **Fonts:** Keep it simple; pick one font or one for headers and another for text.
- **Colors:** Keep it simple; pick one main color and maybe a contrasting color. Most text should be black on a white background.
- **Alignment:** Be aware of how elements of the page align and keep things aligned unless there's a reason not to do so.

- **Spacing:** Give your design room to breathe; don't cram in more if less will do.
- **Contrast:** Use font, alignment, color, and spacing to emphasize your key points.

You can certainly break any of the above rules, but if you're not sure what you're doing, they're a great place to start.

What Should Your Website Include?

Your website is like your résumé. Put in the time to get it right. Here are some steps to decide what your website should include:

- **What do your competitors do?** Make a list of other sites advertising the same services. What do their home pages include? What images do they use? Do they use the first or third person? What information do they provide? How can you contact them? Do you trust them after visiting their sites?
- **What do you want from your visitors?** Think about what you want visitors to your site to do: Call you or e-mail you? Sign up for your blog? Recommend you to friends? Everything on your site should be designed to serve a purpose you have previously established.
- **What do your visitors want from you?** Think about the possible backgrounds of those visiting your site: "I'm thinking of getting a divorce and I'm not sure what happens next." "Someone referred me to you and I want to check you out before I contact you." "I'm starting a business and I need to get incorporated without spending a lot of money."

You have only a matter of seconds before visitors decide to give up and go elsewhere. Does your website help visitors find what they're looking for as quickly as possible?

Also remember that your website must comply with the ethical rules for each jurisdiction where you practice.

Then Do It Again

Like your résumé, your website is never done. Revisit it regularly to decide whether it still reflects who you are and your accomplishments. Does it compare well to your competitors' websites? Does it resonate with your actual visitors and convince them to do what you're hoping they'll do?

Remember: This is Marketing

The steps above are Marketing 101. Any time you think about marketing, think about how it applies to your website; any time you work on your website, think about how it applies to your other marketing plans.

Creating a website, especially if you're just getting started, is a big job, but it's also a key part of establishing yourself in the field. Good luck! ■

This article originally appeared in the Massachusetts Law Office Management Assistance Program: Law Practice Advisor, a blog by contributors Jared Correia, Rodney Dowell, and Rachel Willcox. For more information, visit <http://www.masslomap.blogspot.com/>.



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