

# Just What the Webmaster Ordered

## Tips For Marketing a Law Library Web Site

*Professional Perspectives — Tools and Techniques of the Trade. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Lori Hedstrom at 651/687-5891 or lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com.*

Even some of the best law library Web sites are doomed to obscurity when webmasters fail to market them effectively. Whether the site is being designed for an internal firm's intranet or for going public on the Internet, many simple, budget-friendly marketing techniques can encourage a target audience to visit and hopefully return to a library Web site.

### A Site Worth Seeing

The most obvious way to attract users is to include content that captures their interests. Which research needs might go unmet by other sources and how can those gaps be filled? Are there new types of content or services that can be offered through a new Web site that the target audience might find useful?

Aesthetics are also important. A visually appealing, contemporary design will convey that the site is well planned and dynamic. Conversely, an outdated design may leave the user feeling as if the content is outdated too. This doesn't mean going crazy with Flash or Java. A new color scheme, a banner or even an image map will do the trick. Just keep it tasteful.

Of course, other sites will draw users' attention away from the your library's home page, and rightly so. A librarian can help guide them to those that are the most useful and authoritative by drawing on his or her expertise to categorize and annotate links to them. Even if researchers simply use the library's home page as a pointer to other sites, it is still generating traffic and awareness for the site by serving as a gateway.

### Keep It Clean

As surely as users will be attracted to quality content, they will be repelled by a site full of errors and broken links. Therefore, it's important to check and double-check for mistakes. Fortunately, a number of tools are available to make the job a little easier.

**Spelling.** Many Web editors include spell checkers that check visible text while excluding HTML code.

**Internal links.** Some Web editors can locate broken links between a site's own pages.

**External links.** W3C's free Validation Service (<http://validator.w3.org>) manually checks each page of a site for broken links or for configuring e-mail delivery of site-wide reports.

Of course, even the best tools won't find some errors that the human eye might catch. Therefore, it's worth taking a personal look at each page for any obvious errors. After that, ask someone else to double-check the work. They just might find a few mistakes that were missed on the first pass.

### Choose Appropriate Names and Titles

In addition to perfecting the visible content of pages, effective Web marketing also includes some behind-the-scenes planning. Establishing proper naming conventions for files/folders, page titles and domain name can reduce confusion and boost traffic to the site. It also encourages consistency among multiple contributors.

The **names** chosen for the site's files and folders can affect its usability. *Keep names short, yet descriptive of content.* Use the KISS method: **Keep It Simple, Stupid.** Because capitalization matters to a Web server, *don't combine upper and lower case letters.* Use only lower case letters so that it's easier to remember the site name. Avoid unusual characters like carats (^), underscores, and hyphens. It could cost users time in locating on the keyboard and trouble in deciphering the difference. *Don't include spaces* in names; servers tend to replace them with percent signs.

Also carefully consider **page <title> tags**, even though they don't visibly appear anywhere on the page. Search engines

draw on titles and other meta data to display descriptive information about the pages that they index; if someone bookmarks a site, the <title> becomes its name. Choose a short, concise <title> to help viewers easily identify page contents. Exclude filler words and characters like *the* and *and*. Include the name of the library as an indicator of its authority.

The **domain name** is also important. Select an intuitive name that users could possibly guess — for example, [www.pepsi.com](http://www.pepsi.com). Avoid unusual characters or long names that could cause confusion.

An alias for the domain can be established to redirect users to site even if they entered the wrong Uniform Resource Locator. Of course, that means guessing which URLs they might try in order to establish the alias.

### Don't Forget the Meta Tags

Besides the page <title> tag, there are some other meta tags that can help users find the home page. These are the <keywords> and <description> tags. Even though few library webmasters take advantage of them, they are great tools for improving search engine retrieval.

The **<keywords> tag** contains a string of search terms that describe the page — a maximum of 250 characters. Select words that the target audience might choose to locate the site in a search engine — for example <meta name = "keywords" ... content = "services, circulation, collection, computer, copy, document delivery, instructional, reference, University of Wisconsin, UW, Law Library">.

The **<description> tag** contains a one- or two-sentence summary of page contents. Many search engines display this information in their search results. If no description is provided, a search engine might use the first few words appearing on the page, which may not accurately reflect its content — for example <meta name = "description" ... content = "Services available at the UW Law Library

# A Desktop Learning Opportunity

include circulation, collection, computer, copy center, document delivery, instructional, and reference">.

For a list of free meta tag builders that can structure tags, search Google's directory at [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), for "Meta Tag Generators."

## Take Advantage of Technology

Even after both page content and meta data have been optimized, there are a few more ways to use technology to attract users to a site. One of the most important is *search engine registration*. To find new pages, search engines either follow links from other pages or draw upon a self-submission registry.

Most search engines have a free self-submission feature for recommending that a site be indexed. Take the time to register with several different engines or use a multisite submission service that will perform several registrations. For a list of these services, search Google's directory for "Submitting Services."

When appropriate, *encourage others to link to your site*. Search the Internet for law or library directories and ask that they include the site. Network with other law and library webmasters through discussion lists and meetings to suggest reciprocal linking.

Another very easy way to increase the visibility of a site is to *set the browser of every workstation in the library to open to its home page*. Encourage patrons to start their research from the library home page.

*E-mail* can be used to announce substantial changes or interesting new content. Target messages to groups of users within the organization via internal e-mail lists or reach a larger audience through law- and library-related discussion lists — but be sure that the message doesn't sound like spam because that could cause more harm than good. If the site is changed frequently, consider offering an e-mail update service.

## Low-Tech Marketing Techniques

In addition to the many ways that technology can be used to promote a site,

there are also some low-tech ways to get noticed.

Free or low-cost methods include *placing the site's URL on written materials produced by the library*. Write a column for an existing institution newsletter or start one to highlight the site and other library services.

*Personalize freebies* like colorful bookmarks with the site's URL, highlighting some of the site's best features. Offer the free gifts at training sessions or place them around the library for patrons to take. If the library URL is printed on those free products, users won't forget the site.

With a slightly larger budget, the library could purchase *custom-printed mousepads* for the library or lab workstations. Give them to attorneys, judges, faculty and staff. Award them as National Library Week contest prizes. Put the library URL right at their fingertips while creating a little good will for the library.

## Add PR Events and Personal Advocacy

It's also smart to conduct some public relations with the target audience that will personally guide them to the library's site. One of the more creative library marketers is Alabama's Auburn University Libraries. Knowing that the university's football games drew huge crowds, the libraries hosted a hospitality tent prior to one home game hoping to draw attention to the libraries' electronic resources. Armed with laptops, a computer projector and plenty of library-embossed freebies, librarians generated excitement about the site and even answered some on-the-spot reference questions. To learn more about this successful venture, see the September 2000 issue of *Computers In Libraries*.

While few may attempt something so ambitious, everyone can still get involved in their organizations' special events. For law schools, this might be the first week of school; for firms it might be summer associate orientation. Of course, everyone can plan something for National Library Week. Take advantage of these special events to let users know about the Web site. And don't forget to take a few photos for the site or newsletter.

As valuable as special events can be for marketing, don't depend on these alone. Be an everyday advocate for the library's Web site. Get to know its users personally. Find out what content they would like to see and try to get it. Those that helped create content will likely recommend it to others.

And, of course, don't ignore the importance of the reference interview. If the site can guide a patron to an answer, show him or her the path to that information. A patron who has achieved success by using a site will probably return.

## Measuring Success with Server Logs

Whether or not any effort is devoted to marketing, analysis of usage patterns with a site's server logs can be very insightful. Each time the Web server receives a request from a user wishing to view a site, its log records information about the transaction — such as the computer's Internet protocol address and the page accessed. Interpreted carefully, logs can provide clues about who is using a site and what information is being requested.

**Who?** With knowledge of the range of IPs assigned to a target audience, log files can reveal how often those users are (or aren't) accessing a site. This will help identify targets for future marketing campaigns.

**What?** Tabulating the number of times each page is viewed will show which pages are popular with users and which aren't. High-traffic pages should remain as usable, updated and appealing as possible. Low-traffic ones should be analyzed for problems and/or targeted for marketing.

Logs can even help track the effectiveness of specific marketing campaigns. Along with the many other things they record, log files record the date and time that each page is viewed. Tracking any increases to the starting date of a marketing technique may get some indication of its success.

## Problems with Server Logs

Logs can be very useful, but it is important to understand their shortcomings. Fortunately, it may be possible to compensate in some instances.

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*Inaccuracy of hit counts.* Logs record all files within each page — whether .html, .jpg, .gif or .wav — so hit counts can be very inflated. Compensate for that problem by excluding everything except .htm or .html file types from tallies.

*Low counts because of cached pages.* Repeat requests for a page are often drawn from cache, whether on the users' own computers or on their Internet service providers' servers. In either event, server logs will not show that the page has been viewed more than once. Unfortunately, there isn't much that can be done to adjust for the cache problem, but at least be aware of it.

*Inflated counts because of search engines.* For search engines to be able to index the

content of the site, they must frequently request its pages themselves. This results in an artificially high count because the site's log can't distinguish these requests from human-initiated requests.

*Inflated counts because of automatic browser requests.* If the workstations in the library automatically load its home page, a request is sent to its server every time a new browser window is opened. Knowing the IP addresses of these workstations makes it possible to exclude them from the hit count for the library home page. Although any hits those computers might generate from patrons actually using the library home page will be missed, the log can be configured to record visits to other pages on the library site.

## **Ready ... Set ... Go!**

Whether creating, redesigning or simply maintaining a library Web site, the best time to start marketing is now. As we've seen, marketing techniques don't have to be expensive or difficult.

Just a little time and creativity will let law students, attorneys and judges know what the library's site can offer. And once they've visited, chances are they'll keep coming back for more!

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