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## Law Firms Slow To Adapt To Web World

By **Shannon Henson**

*Law360, New York (November 06, 2008)* -- While law firms have lagged behind most businesses in developing innovative Web sites, consultants say that many now realize they need to include specialized content and convey the culture and work of the firm on the Internet. However, the largest, most established firms generally have been the slowest to embrace the Web.

Some law firms can use their Web sites to fulfill a need to give potential clients, and lawyers looking to refer clients, a sense of who they are. But other law firms, like the longtime powerhouses, don't need to explain their role in the legal field.

"It's almost an inverse ratio with the kind of revenue the firm makes and the brand the firm has and its Web site," said Charles Maddock, a principal at Altman Weil Inc., which provides management consulting services for legal organizations.

"At that point, the Web site isn't much of a branding tool," he added. "If you don't know who Watchell (Lipton, Rosen & Katz) is, or who any members of the AmLaw 25 are, you shouldn't be on their Web sites. It's like walking into a Ferrari dealership and asking how much the cars are anyway. You're just in the wrong place."

That said, firms have increasingly improved their Web sites – or gone to the trouble of finally creating them if they hadn't before - during the past decade, according to Susan Sipe, president of SLS Consulting.

"With the firms we work with, their Web sites have taken over their advertising budget," Sipe said. "For most of my clients, the Internet is the sustaining factor in their marketing at this point."

Firms who deal with the general public, or those who specialize in family, personal injury or criminal defense law, adapted to the Web first, she said. "They are used to having to

work for their clients. But business firms have repeat clients and may have a small or specific client base," Sipe said.

She said some attorneys were reluctant to launch Web sites at first because they viewed the sites as akin to legal advertising, which was illegal until the late 1970s and is still frowned on in certain circles.

"Some are resistant to looking like a lawyer who advertises because they don't want that stigma, but there really isn't a stigma to the Internet. The Internet is replacing word of mouth, and even if someone hears about a firm from word of mouth, they still expect to go to a Web site before they give them a call," Sipe said.

Law firms should be using the medium as a core communication tool with clients, prospective clients, and "dormant clients" who may have worked with the firm for a lawsuit or contractual matter in the past but haven't needed legal services for a while, Maddock said.

More than carrying attorney biographies and representative clients, a firm's Web site should offer actual content, consultants say.

Maddock mentioned one prominent employment firm that posted a free employee manual that a company could download and adapt to their workplace as an example. "It says we are so good in this matter that we are going to give this work product away," Maddock said.

Once a firm decides to invest in its Web site, there are a number of avenues it can explore with the site's design. Some, such as the Van Winkle Law Firm in North Carolina, decided to have a bit of fun.

The firm's Web site has attorney biographies that offer two pages – one with a full-length picture of the lawyer in professional clothing and a listing of professional affiliations and practice highlights; another with a photograph of the attorney in hobby clothes such as cooking or tennis garb and an accompanying description of his or her personal life and community involvement.

The recently redesigned Web site of intellectual property specialty firm Sterne Kessler Goldstein & Fox PLLC incorporates a pseudo-periodic table for its professionals page, allowing visitors to click on nanotechnology, semiconductors and medical devices specialty areas as opposed to nitrogen, hydrogen and cobalt.

Michael Specht, a director at Sterne Kessler and the chairman of its marketing committee, said the firm is building its brand of mind and muscle and that the Web site's redesign was an extension of that effort.

"We think we are pretty unique and we wanted the Web site to reflect that," Specht said.

He said the firm wanted the Web site to convey that its attorneys are strong and easy to work with. "Our culture here is that people like working with one another and our clients and we wanted that to come across," he said.

The Web site also is meant to serve as an attorney and staff recruitment tool, as well as a way for the current members of the firm to feel proud of where they work.

"You could look at our previous Web site and tell we were an IP firm and that we were involved with science and technology, but this really is an evolution of that," Specht said. "We wanted a richer experience, and the Web site has a place for podcasts, a place for videos."

One of the biggest challenges, he said, will be creating quality content and keeping it current on the Web site.

Sipe said that no Web site should be stagnant, which can be a challenge. "They need to be updated all of the time," she said. But Web sites "definitely bring in clients and broaden a firm's reach and exposure."