

Using online services to provide know-how direct to clients.

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Read this remark from an in house lawyer and weep. *'I know I read a law firm flyer on that topic recently, but I can't remember which firm it came from.'*

Hardly surprising, considering the quantity of material pumped out by law firms and the fact that in house counsel may not have the resources to manage that information for easy retrieval when required. It does not, however, say much for the return on law firms' investment in generating and publishing material. Can technology help?

What and why?

Ever since lawyers have been permitted to market themselves in the UK, firms have been producing legal material for external circulation. Initial efforts were lengthy and often turgid. Nowadays, firms, taking pity on their clients in the face of information overload, are making those offerings more concise and targeted. Their usefulness has improved too, in that they generally try to answer the 'so what?' question, rather than just reporting on a new development.

The methods of publication have changed too, from stapled photocopied sheets in the very early days through glossy printed flyers, to email delivery with smartly branded html content.

But why do law firms bother to produce this legal know how for external consumption?

- To showcase their expertise in a particular area, so that if the recipient requires advice on that topic they will know that the firm can deliver.
- As a general contribution to brand recognition.
- To provide something genuinely helpful for the recipient in keeping them up to date, helping them to amass CPD hours or alerting them to issues that may require action. But this is not altruism on the part of the law firms, it is a hope that delivering this benefit will help to engender loyalty and a feeling of obligation on the part of the recipient, resulting in future business.

Delivery and aggregation

Law firms have looked to better methods of delivery to try to make their content more noticeable. An obvious one is collecting the material on a website, so that it can be searched. Many firms put legal publications on their websites with varying degrees of sophistication. Some have created separate sites with tagged and categorised know how materials in a customised interface (e.g. Pinsent Masons' Out-Law, Simmons & Simmons's elexica). These may be helpful for the user whose interest is in a specific area covered by a particular site so that they can treat that site as one of their favourites as a starting point for research, and this may help to bind the client to the law firm.

However, many clients' interests are broad ranging and there will therefore be a number of different pots of information they could use to answer a query.

Aggregators have appeared (Linex Legal is an example) taking law firm content and pulling it together so that when the user finds the material they need, it still bears the branding of the author firm. Client organisations have started to engineer the creation of aggregated sources for their own interest areas, a particular example being the Banking Legal Technology Group which asked a selection of law firms to create and populate an online repository (Portal) for legal content. This provides a benefit to the users, by collecting together useful material from a number of sources, whilst again ensuring that when the user finds the right piece of content, they also find the branding of the firm and the contact details of the author to take the matter further.

The way forward

So is this the way of the future? In my view, no. This is a transitional phase. Even in the context of the BLT Portal, its users probably have a number of internal and external sources for research. Aggregating content from a few law firms may reduce the number of places to look, but it still does not create a one stop shop. So there is still a danger of the user saying '*I know there is something out there, but I don't know how to find it quickly.*'

Could all law firms be required to put their content into the one pot? Impractical. The cost and governance of a vehicle like the BLT Portal are complex enough with a manageable number of firms adding content. However, so long as firms are willing to make their material available (and after all, what do they write it for?) I believe the answer lies in the recipients themselves acting as aggregators. Technology is making this easier all the time. Law firms are increasingly providing their material by RSS feed and this means that the recipient can select all the sources from which he or she would like to receive material and absorb those as feeds into their own system. Client organisations with the budget and resource to take this material and present it in a helpful way within an intranet or knowledge system will be able to make the experience all the better, but even a simple RSS reader is a good start.

Then the recipient will be able to say '*I know I read a law firm flyer on that topic recently and by a simple search I have found the item, and the phone number of the person who knows all about it.*' Then everyone is happy.

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