In the future, the advantage will shift to sites built on easy-to-use templates and rocket-powered blog technology. Designer Web sites will make as much sense as $500 neckties.

Blogs as a Disruptive Technology

By Jerry Lawson

[B]logs are the most important development since the Web itself.
-Erik J. Heels, Law Practice Management, September 2003

Who is Erik Heels, and why is he saying such crazy things about blogs? Heels might justly be called a certified Internet visionary. He began using the Internet at MIT in 1984, wrote the first serious Internet legal research book in 1992 and was a principal in one of the classiest Web site design firms for lawyers, RedStreet Consulting. When it comes to the Internet, his opinion matters. Before deciding if he's right about the importance of blogs, though, let's take a few minutes to examine the blog phenomenon.

Blogs, which is short for *weblogs*, are a special type of Web site that typically take the form of chronologically ordered journals. Blogs are usually produced by special software that makes them very easy to create and update. While conventional Web publishing requires knowledge of HTML and graphics, you can have a blog up and running in five minutes, even if you're not a technical wizard. After that, updating your blog is as easy as using a word processor, then clicking on a button that says "Publish." Denise Howell, of Bag and Baggage (http://bgbg. blogspot.com), dubbed legally oriented blogs "blawgs."

Most blogs have little value, a fact that will not surprise anyone familiar with Sturgeon's law. ("Ninety percent of everything is crud.") The large number of bad blogs leads many to write off blogs as toys, not tools for lawyers. However, a good blog can provide major benefits, which can be divided into three categories: marketing, practical and technical.

Marketing Advantages: Better Rankings, Wider Reach

The single most striking marketing advantage is that good blogs tend to be enormously more visible in sophisticated search engines, including Google. There are two reasons for this:

■ Blogs tend to be much more likely to attract links from other popular Web sites.

■ Blogs tend to be updated frequently.

What Does a Blog Cost?

There are several options for setting up a weblog at low or no cost. Web-based Blogger provides basic blogs for free. This includes Web server space and use of the software installed on the Blogger site (www.blogger.com).

Radio's locally installed software and its Web server space cost $40 a year (www.radio.userland.com). However, sophisticated users of either Blogger or Radio may prefer the flexibility provided by renting their own Web server space, available through discounters like InternetPlanners.com or WebHost4Life.com for $6 a month or less.

Movable Type software is free for personal use and costs $150 for commercial use (www.movabletype.com). Either way, for $40 the company will install the program on a server of your choice. (The installation option is a good deal.) There's also Typepad, a new service that offers the power of Movable Type in a hosted service at prices ranging from $5 to $15 per month (www.typepad.com).

Regardless of which blog application you use, you will probably want to get a custom domain name. These cost $9 a year through discounters like GoDaddy.com.

As a result, it often seems that blogs achieve higher search engine rankings by accident than most conventional sites achieve despite making significant investments.

New technical developments known as RSS and news aggregators create another marketing advantage: greater audience reach. RSS, which variously stands for Rich Site Summary or Really Simple Syndication, is a form of XML, which stands for Extensible Markup Language. It is a way of putting codes into Web pages to make them easier for computers to process. News readers—sometimes called news aggregators—are a new type of software that makes it easy for users to control information that has been formatted in RSS.

You can either install news reader software, such as AmphetaDesk, on your PC or use a user-customizable Web-based aggregator, like the excellent My Detod (http://my.detod.com)

or Daily Whirl (www.dailywhirl.com), both of which offer users their choice of digests of dozens of legal blogs.

This category of software has the potential for explosive growth because it can make a major dent in information overload: It lets you keep on top of what's going on without investing as much time because it "feeds" news from selected sites directly to your desktop machine. For example, one well-known law librarian uses a news reader to monitor 190 sites a day, and a *Washington Post* reporter who has written about news readers monitors 100 to 200. That would not be practical with a conventional Web browser.

So why does this make blogs a powerful marketing tool? A small percentage of people use news readers now, but their importance is disproportionate to their numbers because these early adopters tend, in large part, to be opin-

ion influencers. They are the first ones you want to reach when you are trying to get out a message. Amid all the clutter on the Internet, an RSS feed is one of the best ways to catch their attention. Now, consider that most good blogging software can automatically generate an RSS feed: That's an ability that (for the time being, at least) gives blogs a significant advantage over conventional sites. And RSS feeds are only going to become more important as more people learn how useful they are.

(For more on how news readers work, see Dennis Kennedy's "Beating Information Overload with News Aggregators" in the November/December *Law Practice Management*, as well as Rick Klau's nothing.but.net column, "News Readers: Feed Your Mind," in the October 2003 issue. I explain the major blog marketing advantages in more detail in my article "Web Logs for Lawyers: Lessons from Ernie the Attorney," at www.llrx.com/features/ lawyer weblogs.htm.)

Practical Advantages: A Beauty That's More than Skin-deep

Web sites market mainly by either "validating" or "generating." In the first method, once a client is considering a law firm, a visit to the firm's site can provide information that might close the deal by "validating" the firm and its services. The validation function is valuable, but it hardly exhausts the marketing potential of Web sites.

"Generating" means that the site itself attracts new clients to the law firm. One of the dirty little secrets of conventional Internet marketing is that most Web sites are very poor at generating. In other words, they do not attract many new clients.

A key reason for this failure is that most lawyers consider their Web sites to

be akin to advertisements, something they pay a third party to think about. Most lawyers still think that the prettiest site is the best site. One of the great beauties of blogs is that they tend to change this counterproductive mindset. They tend to change the focus from pretty graphics to timely substantive content. Pretty pictures do not generate many new clients. Timely, substantive content does.

The nature of the new medium creates another subtle practical advantage: It lowers reader expectations. You don't need a law review-type article to update your blog—and that is an enormous plus in a world where the top search engines re-index frequently updated sites (like most blogs) every day, while staler sites might only be re-indexed once a month or less.

Technical Advantages: High Gloss Under the Hood

Most blogs use simple default templates, so their appearance tends to be serviceable but unspectacular. Their looks are reminiscent of nothing-special cars. Yet one of the most intriguing things about blogs is that while most look like Corollas, under the hood many are more like Corvettes. The most sophisticated blog software (including Movable Type) uses cutting-edge features like database-driven page construction, RSS and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS).

Best of all, this power comes in an easy-to-use package. Just about any 12 year old—and even most lawyers—can handle the technical side of blogging.

One of the glories of the database-CSS approach is that it makes it possible to upgrade a Corolla-looking blog to a Corvette-type appearance in two minutes or less. This is accomplished by simply telling the blog to use a different template. Hundreds of templates are available at places such as Blogplates.net, mostly for prices in the $10 to $20 range.

Since the blog market is relatively new, it's hard to find inexpensive blog templates with a level of professional gloss similar to the best hand-designed conventional Web sites. But as more people come to understand the serious business uses of blogs, I predict the following:

■ Within three years, it will be easy to find user-customizable templates that give blogs an appearance comparable to or better than nearly all existing professionally designed conventional sites.

■ The technical performance of these template-controlled sites will be equal to or better than most conventional sites. However, they will cost not thousands of dollars but about $100 or less.

■ The templates will only take about two minutes for a layperson to install, almost instantly giving a consistent, professional appearance on sites with hundreds or even thousands of pages.

What makes this even more interesting is that sophisticated blog software such as Movable Type is flexible enough to be used to achieve any desired design effect. The site can look like a blog, or it can look like a conventional Web site—a very high-quality one.

Who Needs Donald Trump's Tie? Off-the-Rack Site Design

Nobody in my social circle buys one-of-a-kind handcrafted neckties for $500, let alone $5,000. We go to the store and select from hundreds of mass-produced neckties that use designs created by talented artists.

What do our ties cost? Maybe $50, for a really nice tie from Nordstrom. Less if you buy it some other places.

That's where blogs are going to take Web site design. You will expect to pay not $5,000, or even $500, for the graphics on your Web site, but more like a necktie price—$100, or even less. The majority of readers will now understand why most conventional Web site designers have little good to say about blogs.

Will these template-driven sites be "one-of-a-kind," though? The point is: It doesn't matter. I don't care, just like most lawyers won't care. Why not?

Well, back to the necktie analogy. My best necktie, the one I wear to court, is a Metropolitan Museum design that cost $30. It's mass-produced, but it's a nice tie. If I wanted to, I could pay somebody to handcraft a necktie for me. To get the same quality as the Metropolitan Museum design would probably cost hundreds, more likely thousands, of dollars. Unless you are Donald Trump, or someone in his league, you would be foolish to make such an investment.

Do I care if someone else uses the same Web site design template that I use? About as much as I care if I see someone wearing the same type of necktie. Further, even though my Metropolitan Museum tie is mass-produced, I have yet to see anybody else wearing the same design. It's a big country. It's a big Internet as well.

Moreover, good templates are easily customizable. With very little technical knowledge, using templates and CSS, in a few seconds you can change the logo, the colors, the fonts and more on every single page of a very large site. In other words, there is a good chance that even someone who's using the very same template as

you would not recognize your site, once you'd done some easy customizations.

This is the direction in which site design is being pushed by CSS and sophisticated databases, which have been popularized by the better blogging software. Instead of handcrafted, one-of-a-kind designs, the market is going toward plug-and-play templates, easily customizable and swappable. Web site design will become a commodity.

Will some organizations still insist on custom-designed sites? Those who will pay top dollar for the snob appeal of a $5,000 tie will always be with us. However, easily customizable templates will give those of us who prefer to buy our ties at Nordstrom—or Target—a classy yet inexpensive alternative for our sites.

Here's the *really* interesting part: When high-quality templates are available, their users will not just save money—they will get higher quality and better appearance than they get from their current "custom" designs. This is a result of several factors.

The economics of the site design business. Unless they are charging absolute top dollar, which most clients are unwilling to pay, Web site designers can't afford to put too much time into any particular site. Therefore, most conventional sites are just an original logo slapped on top of a not-particularly distinguished template, anyway.

Better usability. There are a range of factors involved in site usability, which Web usability guru Jakob Nielsen explains in his book *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity* (New Riders, 1999) and his famous essay "The End of Web Design" (www.useit.com/alertbox/20000723. html). But in short, the closer a design adheres to accepted standards, the more likely it is to be successful. In general,

the more it deviates from standards in the interest of being "creative," the less likely it is to be successful.

Affordable genius. The average clothes designer lacks the style of Ralph Lauren. Mass marketing lets many people own Ralph Lauren designs. Similarly, most Web site designers lack the style sense of the top designers in their industry. Clever use of templates will make the genius of the world's absolute best designers as affordable as a Ralph Lauren off the rack.

All the Characteristics of a Disruptive Technology

Blogs, or, more accurately, Web sites built on sophisticated blog technology, have the potential to destroy the Web site design business as we know it today. A crazy idea? Sure. It's about as crazy as thinking in the 1960s that discount retailers could dethrone undisputed champion Sears. Or that PCs, which seemed like toys to those in the computer business in the '70s, could dethrone industry champ IBM, then king of typewriters and "big iron."

Clayton Christiansen, a professor at the Harvard Business School, developed the idea of "disruptive technologies" in *The Innovator's Dilemma* (HBS Press, 1997), now considered a classic management book. Christiansen was interested in why well-managed companies, considered very innovative within their industries, come to stumble. After studying a number of examples, he identified a leading reason why great companies fail—the inability to deal with challenges from a certain type of innovative products, ones he calls "disruptive technologies." He summarized the threat as follows:

Disruptive technologies bring to a market a very different value propo-

sition than had been available previously. Generally, disruptive technologies underperform established products in mainstream markets. But they have other features that a few fringe (and generally new) customers value. Products based on disruptive technologies are typically cheaper, simpler, smaller, and, frequently, more convenient to use.

Blogs, and more conventional-looking sites built on templates and sophisticated blog technology, match that description quite closely.

When the Blank Stares Brighten, The Revolution Is Here

Are blogs really the most important thing to come along since the World Wide Web? I have a reality-check mechanism that tells me, "No, not yet." I frequently ask lawyers I meet whether they know what blogs are. Today the question draws mostly blank stares or condescending comments. ("You mean you have time to read those things?")

I will know blogs have indeed become the most important thing since the Web when each person I ask about blogs knows what they are, and when most of the brighter respondents answer, with a sly grin, "Sure. Do you have one, too?"

Will that happen? Let's hope so. Blogs, and sites built with sophisticated blog software, have the potential to revolutionize the way most people and most law firms think about and use the Internet. We will probably all be better off if such a revolution comes about.

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Blogging Firsthand:

Q & A with Stuart Levine, Lawyer-Blogger

By Jerry Lawson

Stuart Levine, an attorney in Baltimore, Maryland, operates Tax & Business Law Commentary, http://taxbiz.blogspot.com. Here, he shares his personal experiences and perspectives on what a weblog can mean to a lawyer's practice.

Q Why did you start keeping a blog?

A Many years ago, I was with a firm that considered starting a newsletter. We failed to move forward because, on balance, the cost-benefit analysis just didn't seem to justify the project. Not only were the direct costs significant, but the indirect costs of creating content seemed to present difficulties as well.

Later, when Web pages seemed all the rage, I thought about having one. Again, close analysis led to the conclusion that a pure Web page was of limited utility. It was too static and, in my opinion, just sat there. My guess was that the Web site would not attract readers and that, at best, they would hit it only if they tripped over it.

Weblogs are different. They're cheap. They're quick. They're current. And, unlike "plain" Web pages, they don't just sit there. One can tie a weblog to a listserv and to RSS syndication and make it into a "push" vehicle.

Finally, I just wanted an additional outlet to discuss legal issues that are of interest to me.

Q What benefits have you noticed?

A First, even before I started my weblog, I generally read the daily tax developments and occasionally read the Maryland appellate court decisions and federal decisions as they were handed down via the Web sites of those courts. Now, however, I have a greater incentive to follow new developments, if only to obtain content for my weblog.

Second, there's no substitute for writing a piece about a new case or revenue ruling to force you to figure out what it really means. I've had the experience of changing my views on a case or ruling as I read it more thoroughly in order to write my posting.

Third, while I was a fairly good writer before beginning the blog, I sense that my writing ability has improved. Practice may not make perfect, but it does generate improvement.

Fourth, the blog has become somewhat of an institutional memory. In other words, a client comes in and presents a problem, and then I say to myself: "Gee, didn't I write something about this problem a few months ago?" I then do a search to try to find out what the development was and what I wrote about it.

Finally, I believe that, over time, the blog will act as "glue" tying me more closely to my client base. Even when specific clients have no ongoing projects with me, I will still be communicating with them.

Q What are the downsides?

A First, second and third: Time, time and time. It takes a fairly significant time commitment to do a good job. I would like to post two or three times a week, but I haven't been able to meet that goal.

Beyond that, I do try to be cautious in what I say. By way of example, I just joined a new firm. I have to be reasonably certain that I don't offer an opinion that is contrary to a position that either I or someone else in the firm is taking on behalf of a client.

Q Where do you see your blog going from here?

A I want to "institutionalize" it. That is, I will probably migrate it from the Blogger.com Web server I now use to a permanent URL that I own and use something like Moveable Type, so that my blog is locally installed. More importantly, however, I want to make my blog more visible. I have some ideas about how to accomplish this, but they're sort of trade secrets at this point. I'll let you in on them when I roll them out.