

Parlez-Vous Global Marketing?

Law firms should develop a foreign language Web site to attract potential clients from China to Mexico.

Rapid economic growth in many countries is fueling big growth opportunities these days for U.S. law firms. In good times and bad, legal services are required at nearly every step of the international trade process, and the demand for American legal expertise remains strong.

The booming economies of China and India, combined with the success of the European Union, are just a few of the dynamic forces reshaping the global economy—all with major implications for American attorneys.

Yet despite these promising opportunities for American law firms overseas, surprisingly few have discovered the advantages of marketing their services in foreign languages.

In Asia, China is poised to soon replace Japan as the world's second largest economy. In Europe, the combined EU gross

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Marketing

domestic product now surpasses that of the United States, offering a vast and now nearly borderless combined economy of 380 million people. American lawyers properly positioned to profit from these new market trends and build business in these areas of the world are succeeding. Leading the way are law firms that have learned the advantages of marketing and communicating to clients in their own languages.

THE CHINA EXAMPLE

The tremendous growth of the Chinese legal market is a prime example of these exciting growth opportunities. Since China lifted restrictions in the early 1990s, the total number of international law firm offices there has ballooned to more than 200. Today, more than 40 U.S. law firms have established offices in China, and this number continues to grow each year.

Despite the large potential in China, less than 10 percent of the top 50 U.S. firms have made Chinese language content available on their Web sites. Compared with the more-market-

ing-savvy accounting and consulting firms that effectively use foreign language Web sites, U.S. law firms generally lag far behind. For example, two leading accounting and consulting firms, Accenture and KPMG, have separate Web sites in Chinese in addition to other languages.

Law firms from other countries are evolving to take advantage of these new growth opportunities in emerging markets, sometimes faster than U.S. rivals. British and other European firms are merging with local attorneys in many countries, while accounting and consulting firms are taking advantage of national laws that permit the offering of services bundled with legal advice. London-based Allen & Overy is an example of a non-U.S. firm that has made international marketing a top priority with a remarkable 11 foreign languages available on its global Web site.

Unfortunately, only a small percentage of U.S. law firms realize the potential of generating new business or strengthening ties to existing clients by communicating in foreign languages. The prevailing attitude seems to be, "Why market in a foreign language when English is the language of international business?"

Well, times are fast changing. Some forecasters predict that Chinese will replace English in terms of total Internet users within the coming decade. While English is undeniably an indispensable tool in the world of international trade and commerce, and will probably remain that way for the conceivable future, offering your services in the language of your clients can unquestionably give you an added competitive boost.

Imagine this scenario: You represent a major international oil company starting exploration in a Central Asian country. You do a quick Google search and come up with four law firms on the Web from that country. You check out their Web sites and find that only one has meaningful information in English, and it appears capable of handling your business. You call your friend from law school, and she lists three firms, including the one with the English Web site. You do some additional checking, and the same firm comes up a couple more times with no major negatives, so you decide to contact it.

Now imagine the situation is reversed. The general counsel of a major foreign oil company with sales of \$1.7 billion is looking for U.S. counsel to help with purchases of \$250 million in U.S. drilling equipment and in lobbying for trade credits. He uses his native-language version of Google to conduct a search. (At last count, Google is available in 97 languages.)

THE COMPETITOR WINS

The chances are those words are not on your site. Your site won't come up no matter how much material you have about that country or his industry because his search words are not in English. Meanwhile, your competitor, with even a few paragraphs in that language, suddenly has the attention of the general counsel with decision-making authority.

To see how this works in real life, try a Google search for "U.S. law firm lobbying." You will get hits for the State Capital Global Law Firm Group, Baker & Daniels, Greenberg Traurig, and Patton Boggs. The same test search we conducted in Japanese, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish in the corresponding Google foreign sites brings up few if any U.S. sites. A handful of U.S. firms with strong language content, such as Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton; Morrison & Foerster; White & Case; Fulbright & Jaworski; Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe; and Jones Day do, however, come up repeatedly in various law-related searches on non-English Google Web sites.

Most D.C.-area firms have little if any foreign language content on their Web sites, considering the fact that they derive much of their revenue from internationally diverse practice fields such as telecommunications, taxation, international trade, defense, and lobbying. Web sites, e-mail, and deregulated telecommunications are drastically reducing the costs of marketing internationally, making this all possible on a scale never before seen.

MORE GLOBAL REACH

Organizations of all sizes, whether private companies, trade associations, or NGOs, are taking advantage of these new economics and extending their global reach. Invariably they'll need legal counsel. For organizations that are just starting to make the cross-border plunge, marketing to them in their own language is even more important because their executives may not be comfortable conducting business in English. Many of these organizations are growing rapidly, and the sagging U.S. dollar is making U.S. legal fees even more affordable.

For firms that don't generate enough business just yet to open a foreign office, a Web site targeted to a particular country or language is an excellent idea. Even one or two pages in a searchable foreign language can be surprisingly effective for a relatively small investment with the right keywords for search engine optimization.

My firm, Attorney Translation Services, offers translation and interpretation services performed by licensed attorneys in all major languages. Based on our experience, we recommend that law firms create a marketing plan according to industry, country, or region. Focus on a real market that is large enough to generate significant revenue for your firm, but small enough that it connects with your target audience, such as Chinese exporters, Central Asian energy producers, or Mexican agribusiness. Then let that focus drive your language needs. Putting up general Web pages in Spanish won't generate the volume of inquiries that a specific page will. When you do open an office, you will already have

much of your marketing material ready to use and will have established some credibility in the process.

FIND THE 'HIDDEN' RESOURCES

Many firms have "hidden" resources when it comes to developing marketing strategies and material. To determine what to put on your foreign language site, first look internally to see what talent you can harness. Many law firms have bilingual attorneys and staff.

Next, look to see what external relationships and affiliations you can leverage. Simply letting prospects know about the availability of multilingual legal staff at your firm via your Web site can be a major first step in capturing this business. Your current clients may also be surprised to find that you can speak the languages they require.

We recommend adding bilingual members of your firm at an early stage in the planning process for multilingual marketing initiatives. Individuals who have lived in a target country or speak a foreign language can be invaluable in getting you pointed in the right direction and often can deliver unexpected sources of contacts.

Once your foreign language Web site is ready to launch, you need people available with appropriate language skills to handle client inquiries. An alternative is to establish a close relationship with a translation service provider that can field inquiries. Working in advance with a translation company is helpful so that when the opportunity arises, you can respond quickly without spending time to screen candidates.

After you have landed a new client or expanded business overseas with an existing one, our experience shows that clients are generally dissatisfied if your attorneys are doing translation work at your standard attorney billable rates. Also, most law firm attorneys resent doing translation work to the exclusion of legal work. This resentment can escalate to the point where some attorneys actually switch jobs.

When it comes to bilingual hiring, a good rule of thumb is to limit staffing to the management of essential client communications and contract third-party linguists or attorneys for the additional work. This way, your internal people stay focused on law and you can expand quickly to handle major litigation, mergers, or agreements as they arise.

In summary, the Internet has reduced the world to the size of a BlackBerry. Today, without giving it a second thought, clients routinely e-mail legal assignments from around the world. Attorneys are retained without personal introductions, and deals are completed without face-to-face meetings. This same immediacy also means that clients are more likely to reach out to people who can speak their language anywhere.

What used to be cost and time barriers continue to shrink and in some cases are nonexistent. Powered by technology, law firms can significantly expand their marketing reach and simultaneously build awareness in multiple foreign countries. Firms that adapt their business strategy and culture to meet the changes brought on by advances in technology will be the firms that succeed.

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