

Adding value with web technologies

By Yong Lee, President & CEO, OMTI, developers of ReporterBase

Writing an article about the value of web technology for the Society for the Technological Advancement of Reporters might seem like preaching to the choir. And if you know the author is someone who develops technology products for the court reporting industry, you might be skeptical about his message. But if you, as a member of a technology-focused group, want to benefit from using the web in your business, you will probably find some food for thought, if not action, here.

Service +

In a crowded field like court reporting, the best way to stand out and have a chance at survival is to offer more than a transcript. Cutting prices is no way to grow your business long term, you have to add value to that transcript.

Value-added services is not a new concept, but web technology adds a myriad of ways to add value that are uniquely suited to court reporting and other legal support firms. And the beauty of most web technology is that you can add new services to your business without hiring new staff. Small firms can offer the same level of service as large firms, web technologies can level the playing field in this way.

So what are some of these technologies that can help you get more business and sustain your company? I'm going to discuss five: online offices, online order forms, online communities, webinars, and your corporate site.

Online: Always on

As a developer of online offices, I am a big proponent of them. Online offices are secure sites where your clients and reporters have access to information they would otherwise have to call you for or wait to be delivered. If a client wants to know the details of a scheduled depo or an outstanding invoice, or needs a copy of a transcript while away from the office, they can access this kind of information anytime, anywhere they have Internet access – without your intervention.

With automated online offices, you suddenly extend your customer support hours to around-the-clock, 365 days a year, without adding staff. And if you connect it directly to your in-house calendar, billing and repository system(s), then not only do your clients and reporters have always-on access, the information they access is always up-to-date. And again, technology means you can offer this without adding staff.

There are other benefits to offering online offices, such as file sharing between reporters, reducing the paper load in your office and in your clients' offices, and more accurate communications; but if you remember just one thing, it's the convenience you're offering.

Making online better

Online order forms have the same promise of offering around-the-clock convenience, but the reality is often something else. Due to the nature of a deposition, online depo request forms present secretaries and paralegals with the daunting task of filling in numerous fields for a single depo. When that's the case, it becomes more convenient to call you instead, so your online ordering service goes unused.

If this is your situation, you can improve it with technology. A simple start is to include directions on your form for using browser auto-fill capabilities. Using auto-fill options, your clients will have less to type because the browser will fill in some fields for them. And the less they have to type, the more likely it is they will use your form.

Of course, the more the form remembers, the better. If your form is also tied to your in-house calendar and client information, it can fill in every field, so all your client needs to do then is select the date and time. When you get to this level of convenience, the balance sways back from calling you to order a depo. Plus, this level of auto-fill significantly lessens typos and omissions on your client's part, streamlining the process for the both of you.

Staying connected

My next suggestion for adding value to your business is aimed at strengthening your ties with your reporters and other service providers. The fact is that not only do you compete with other firms for clients, you also compete for quality court reporters. You need to offer services which reporters can benefit from. Online offices can offer valuable benefits: For example, reporters can turn in completed jobs without traveling to your office, they can manage their schedule and workload online, and they can see what their next paycheck will be.

Another way to make your company more desirable to reporters is to create a community for them. Online communities can strengthen your relationship with reporters by making them feel like they are a valued part of a common group.

A simple start can be a company news section on your corporate website, in which you post news about your reporters and other employees. Include personal news, wedding and birth announcements, who won the company fantasy football league; along with professional accomplishments, so that there's a feeling that real people work here. You can also include news about reporters who have moved on. By keeping them part of your community, they are more likely to harbor good feelings about your company. And that can translate into them referring other good reporters to you and possibly returning themselves at some time.

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You can also open up your online community more by adding a bulletin board to your website. Here, your reporters, both current and past, can talk amongst themselves online, building the community organically. There are many canned bulletin board systems available online now, and some are free. One caveat: I would recommend using one in conjunction with user IDs and passwords, so you do not have to constantly monitor the board for inappropriate use.

Teach online

You have expertise, or you know someone with expertise. Make it easy for others to learn from you by hosting a webinar. Webinars (web-based seminars) are interactive, online presentations. In contrast to a webcast, which is more like a TV show broadcast over the Internet, webinars allow a certain amount of back-and-forth between presenter and audience, which makes them an ideal teaching tool. The presentation is live, but no one has to travel to attend. All they need is their online connection and a phone.

You can use webinars to train attorneys, paralegals and reporters how to use your online services. Or, more ambitiously, you can educate them about current issues that affect them – for example, if a lot of your clients work on medical and insurance cases, bring in an expert on the new Medicare prescription drug legislation and problems surrounding it.

With some planning, you might be able to make your webinars even more valuable. Just like reporters need CEUs, lawyers have MCLE (mandatory continuing legal education) requirements. Everyone is looking to increase their knowledge and meet their certification requirements, so if you can offer a convenient way to earn credits, you've added some serious value to your services.

Improving your website

My final suggestion is to keep your company's website current. And for this, you can use tried-and-true standard web technology. You don't need to go wild incorporating every latest web fad on your site. Court reporting isn't that kind of industry, and lawyers might be suspicious of a site that is too slick. But if your site still looks like it did when you first posted it, and you haven't changed a word on it, then it isn't adding any value to your business. It might actually be harming it.

So keep your site looking up to date and professional. Don't look at other court reporting sites for inspiration; look at your clients' sites (or the sites of law firms you want as clients), and be sure your site looks as good as or better than theirs. Do not copy or match the look of their sites, think "complimentary" instead.

Consider your site's layout carefully: Make your contact information easy to find. Put the most useful information on the front page. And use the top left and right spots of each page, which are where people look the most, to your advantage.

Optimize your site for better placement in search engine returns (such as Google): Come up with a business description and key words that an attorney, paralegal or reporter might use to find a court reporting firm, such as a list of the services you provide and your service area along with industry terms like court reporting and court reporters. Have your web designer add them to your web site's code.

And provide useful content that gets updated, so readers have a reason to check back. Include practical information like how to set auto-fill preferences for forms. Post articles you've written or transcripts of speeches you've given that relate to your audience. Announce upcoming events of interest to your clients, employees and reporters.

Your site's content doesn't have to be all business either. You could include something more personal, such as if you're a golfer, you could write reviews of different courses around the U.S. you've played at. Or if health and fitness are your thing, post articles on office ergonomics, exercises to do at your desk, healthy snacks for the office, maybe reviews of hotel fitness centers and spas. Or post a calendar of upcoming cultural and social events if that's where your passion lies.

You can invite readers to submit articles too. Nurturing this kind of participation is another way to build your community, which in turn adds value to your business.

Make your business stand out

The web technologies I've covered here can add valuable services to your business. Some of these technologies are tried-and-true, some are more unfamiliar; but each offers important benefits for your business. By incorporating some or all of them into your business and marketing plans, you could differentiate your business from the pack, and give clients and reporters plenty of reasons to choose you every time.

And with your foot in the door and your company in their hearts – through the intelligent use of the web – you're ready to provide them with an even more valuable service: exceptional transcripts. Can I get an 'Amen'?

Yong Lee, president and CEO of OMTI, developers of ReporterBase (www.omti.com), has been developing technology solutions for the court reporting industry for over 20 years. This year, ReporterBase released new versions of its business management software, RB8, and online offices, RB Web 8.



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