

Building your own "validation" Website

Why you need one and how to do it (almost) yourself

By Eric R. Gruber

I needed a better Website for my law firm, and so I built my own. It turns potential clients into actual clients. I did most of it myself, making limited use of a consultant. It cost $867 plus sweat equity. A lot of sweat equity.

What is a validation Website?

It is your personal brand. It is you. It is everything about you that you want to share and convey in a professional manner. It should look something like this: www.GruberLawGroup.com. It is simple. Clean. Modern. Professional.

When a potential client or employer looks at it, it turns you from nobody to somebody. From flat to round. It inspires trust in you. It gives you credibility. It validates you.

Why does my personal brand matter?

Why does Coca-Cola take up more shelf space than Royal Crown? Why do you pay more for Levi's than for Wranglers? Branding. As a professional, you want to have Coca-Cola shelf space and Levi's denim prices. That takes credibility and validation.

Why should I want a validation Website?

Thomas Friedman told us the world was flat a decade ago and that we will increasingly collaborate over long distances. Individuals are enterprises unto themselves with unique talents, qualities, skills and interests. If you are a solo, you understand this. If you are an associate, you may not have thought of yourself this way. Even so, you have skills to market beyond a half page biography on someone else's Website. On average, people change jobs 11 times over the course of a career, not always voluntarily. Take some time and invest in a showcase of yourself to enhance your visibility, credibility, presence and professionalism.

Job prospects and business development

When that day comes and I have the luxury of hiring an associate, I'd much rather have a link to their Website where I can get to know them, read all their writing samples and publications, see a photo or two, and watch a video of their demeanor. And after I hire that person, their Website, Yelp!, Facebook, and years of diligence in promoting themselves online becomes an extension of my own marketing. If it came down to two candidates, one who had infrastructure built out to generate leads and one who didn't, who would you choose? That's why you need to be dynamic, be human and not just a resume.

What does a validation Website need to do?

I'll tell you what it doesn't need to do and probably never will: Get you onto page one of organic Google results. Why not? Because you can't do it for $1,000 and you probably can't do it for $50,000. If you want to be page one for any search that doesn't include your name or law firm name, good luck. For instance, if you are gunning to get listed page one for "Personal Injury Lawyer San Francisco," I'd suggest investing that money into starting a new car company and going head to head with GM and Ford instead. You have better odds.

There is so much momentum, money and economies of scale operating against you that you simply cannot compete. And, quite frankly, too much mystery. How many people do you know who have spent thousands and gotten nowhere? Just today I queried verbatim the following: San Mateo, Employment, Lawyer. I used no actual names. There it was on Google page one; a dear friend's law firm Website. She built the site herself so I called and asked what SEO work she had done or had specifically incorporated. Answer? None.

If you want to pay someone to figure that mystery out, go for it. I don't because the goal of a validation Website, for now, is myopic: it is to showcase your talents to people who are *looking for you*, to let people get to know you, to inspire trust in you, to give you credibility, and to validate you.

You want one. Now what? Getting to know what you don't know

If you want to do it for under $1,000, then you need to have some sweat equity to invest. A Web design and graphic consultant will be needed. The best I found was Spark Collaborative (www.sparkcollaborative.com). They offer a suite of services, including completely custom design, but I opted for their most minimal package for $600, which included a WordPress template, assistance with branding, and logo design. The universe helps those who help themselves, and if you follow that, your consultant will help you, too.

In the end, you can pay more to get more, including copywriting, but it is all a tradeoff. The less you want to do yourself, the more you have to pay someone else, and I would argue the less authentic your Website becomes, the less you know about the platform your Website is developed on, and the more you have to pay others in the long run to keep it current,

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customized, and fresh. You have a computer, you have Google, and you have a brain. I suggest using all three extensively.

Here are the things you need to do and think about before you begin collaborating with your consultant.

www.what?.com: Choose a domain name and a Webhost

This process can take longer than you think depending on how picky you are. That clever or completely generic name you've always thought about? Guess what? It's already taken. Don't waste your consultant's time with a languishing open account while you decide "who" you are. Nail down what you want your Website address to be and what Webhost you will use. Most Webhosts will act as a broker and allow you to search available domain names and will sell you the real estate you are looking for. I use Bluehost.

Configure your email

Your Webhost will also provide you with an email address. You gain credibility by having an email that is customized to your domain name (eric@gruberlawgroup.com versus EricsFirm@yahoo.com).

It is up to you to configure your email "client." That is to say, you need to figure out how to retrieve your email from your Webhost server. Microsoft Outlook is the most widely known email client, but I personally use Google.

I created a Gmail account (gruberlawgroup@gmail.com) from which I manage all my various law-related emails. From that Google email account I can send and receive emails from my personal domain (eric@gruberlawgroup.com), as well as from the accounts of the other firms I contract with (eric@lawfirm.com, eric@lawfirm2.com, etc). All emails sent to any of my email addresses filter into the Gmail account, and I can respond to any email, regardless of the original address it was sent to, from any of my email addresses. I can do this on mobile. I can do this on desktop. It wasn't easy. But I had a computer, Google, and a brain. So do you.

Choose a Website platform and learn how to use it

I recommend WordPress. There are easier platforms to learn to develop content on, but it's easy enough and offers the best SEO in town. With WordPress you are in a better position if you want to enhance your Website, customize it, and supercharge its SEO capabilities. It's all open source with huge community support, so the answer to anything that is giving you trouble is a Google query away.

Get creative

Plan the design and layout of your Website. What pages and subpages? Photos? Imagery? Logo? Tagline? Will you be incorporating videos, writing samples, and publications? Hint: you should be. Confession: I've yet to follow all of my own advice.

Take screenshots of things you like on the Web and present what you've found to your consultant so they can help you implement your vision.

Start writing

With a basic page and subpage structure in mind YOU need to write content for those pages. Define who you are and what you strive for as an attorney, as a person, as a creative, and what your goals are. This might be one of those times to dust off and read the personal statement you wrote to get into law school. With a Website, blog and an audience, you may find it just the opportunity and motivation to re-engage some of the idealism you lost in the transition to the realities of life.

Resist the temptation to pay for copywriting services. People want to hire and engage with someone that they can trust, who is competent and with whom they feel a connection. You connect with people online just like you do in real life; by displaying personality, compassion, style, humor, values, and goals. That authenticity will come through if you write your own copy and will save you on costs.

I should be writing with SEO in mind? Right?

Yes, no, maybe so. My desire for authenticity is why I rejected my strong sense to obsess over SEO and purposefully incorporate a bunch of keywords into my Website copy. There are easy formulas to do this that everyone agrees about when it comes to optimizing a page:
1) decide on the keywords you want that page to hit for; 2) place the keywords in the page title; 3) place it again in the first sentence or two on the page; and
4) place it again X number of times throughout the page, but not too many times or it sounds spammy.

If you enjoy typing with oven mitts on and expressing yourself from inside an SEO box, then go for it. I felt it more important to communicate who I was and to get my ideas and philosophy established without worrying about creativity constraints.

Then no SEO? Not so!

You need to know and do enough SEO so that you are found when a referral is looking for you. He or she may not have a direct link, but they will try to Google you. Go ahead and Google (Eric R. Gruber San Francisco Lawyer) or (Eric Robert Gruber San Mateo Personal Injury) or (Eric R. Gruber Employment Bay Area). Do the same for images. These are the types of things people would Google if they had a warm lead to you. Most of those will come up somewhere on page one of Google.

That didn't take a marketing genius to create. After you invest the time to learn the back end of whatever Web development platform you choose, you will be ready to read a couple articles (a half day's worth) on SEO. In a nutshell, write into a few pages on your Website all the geographical locations you practice, your name, practice area, along with the word

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attorney and lawyer. Tag your photos with the same info. Not hard.

If you use WordPress, then read this: http://yoast.com/articles/wordpress-seo/. Do what you can. You're a lawyer, not an SEO expert. If you want it to do more than that, then pay someone while you go get clients, practice law, and try cases.

Brush up on Photoshop and purchase your images

The second largest expense in time and treasure will be your imagery. The Internet may seem limitless, but most images are subject to copyright. The most extensive repository of stock images for purchase and licensing is www.istockphoto.com or www.thinkstock.com. There are some free image sites around, but the selection is limited. The best I found was http://www.flickr.com/creativecommons.

To edit what you buy, use Photoshop if you have it, or download GIMP if you do not. I used GIMP for all my image manipulation, which was EXTENSIVE. Even if you don't do as much image manipulation as I needed to, you should still get your basic photo-editing skills polished because without fail, every time you want to put one of your photos somewhere else online, on one of your social media profiles, in your email signature, or on your letterhead; it is going to require editing. Trust me. It also requires money and a longer turnaround time when someone else has to do it.

Engage your consultant

You can shop around, but I worked with Linsi Brownson and Alycia Wicker of Spark Collaborative (www.sparkcollaborative.com). The amount of work they did for $600 is phenomenal. They work exclusively with WordPress and to get the most bang for my buck, I wanted to be able to navigate the backend of WordPress BEFORE we started working together. You cannot learn it all, and that is where their expertise shines. For the price, they have limited time, and it is much better for you to be able to COLLABORATE and rely on them when you get stuck instead of using their time to teach you the basics.

Get connected

How and whether you choose to leverage social media is up to you, but you know you should do it. It needs to be integrated into your Website and it's not hard to do. The Website framework that gets set up for you will accommodate it. Even so, keep in mind that virtual networking is only useful to the extent you can turn it into actual networking and actual clients.

Be mobile optimized

Your Website needs to be mobile optimized. If the prognosticators are correct, the majority of all search will be performed on mobile devices in 2014 (if not 2013 once the statistics come in). If your Website is not mobile optimized, the bounce rate is atrociously high. In other words, people take one look and "bounce." Peace out. Those people do not become your clients or call you to do business.

Get contacted

To convert visitors to clients, you need to prominently have your phone number and contact forms everywhere and on every page. You have no idea what page your potential clients might land on. They should be able to email you or call you from any of them.

Get reviewed: Word-of-mouth has gone digital

What's the difference between a lawyer with a 4-star Yelp rating versus a 5-star Yelp rating? One gets paid twice as much as the other. Want to take a guess which one that might be? I have strong opinions on this and the research studies to back it up. Every potential client that you gave a consultation to, every current client, every former client, and every colleague you know needs to be contacted and asked to review you. It's good for business and an SEO goldmine. A good reputation management system can help, and I am currently utilizing www.Bazaarify.com.

The onus is yours

So now you know what you don't know. The more money you spend, the more steps you can skip (some to your detriment). Even with the most expensive consultants, you are going to engage in a collaborative process, so you need to invest your time if you want the final product to resemble something you want. If you want to pay for it, forget about it, and let someone else design and define you, so be it. You can pay for a bespoke suit, sight unseen, but will be hard pressed to blame anyone but yourself when you are forced to show up to court the next day wearing your brand new, non-refundable denim tuxedo.



Gruber

Eric R. Gruber is the founder and principal at Gruber Law Group. *He is an experienced trial attorney dedicated to obtaining justice for those who have suffered injury, abuse, discrimination, and violations of their civil rights. Mr. Gruber frequently contracts with select attorneys in need of assistance in litigation matters and also utilizes unique technologies and strategies to provide representation to individuals who cannot afford traditional legal services, yet do not qualify for legal aid. In addition, he acts as an online reputation management consultant for small businesses and other attorneys.*

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