

Should your law firm create its own iPhone app?

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With an estimated 30 million iPhone users and another 600,000 in line for the newest version, set to be released this week, some lawyers are launching their own iPhone apps to market their firms.

When international law firm Morrison and Foerster released an iPhone app that provides content from its website and blog, it got good reviews for its look and feel.

"It's nice. It's designed to catch your attention. It even includes a game on there," said Jeff Richardson, a New Orleans attorney who blogs at [iPhoneJD](#).

But it also generated a debate over whether every law firm should come out with its own app.

"I don't see why not. If you're a small firm you want to think about the most [marketing] bang for your buck. If you're already creating content for your web page and your blog, you're really repurposing content in another package [by creating an app]," said Martha Sperry, an attorney in Boston who launched an iPhone app that aggregates content and provides links and a feed to promote her legal consulting business Advantage Advocates.

But critics say that it's important to take care of first things first - before spending time and money creating an app, a firm should make its website viewable on an iPhone or BlackBerry.

"I'm not sure why you would go to the trouble of making an iPhone app if your website doesn't fit well on the device," said Doug Cornelius, a Boston attorney and author of the Compliance Building blog.

Sperry said that cost doesn't have to be an issue, because small firms on a tight budget can do what she did and use near-free web tools like Appmavr or Mobile Roadie to create an app by filling in the blanks on a template.

But the problem with that method, said Richardson, is that your app is unlikely to stand out among the estimated 250,000 iPhone apps already out there.

"I know there are services that are free or as low as a few hundred dollars, but by definition they are not going to offer any pizzazz to give anyone a compelling reason to download your app," he said.

Reason for launching an app

Before creating an iPhone app, lawyers should ask themselves whether they have something to say or are just doing it for a gimmick.

"Is it sexy to say you have your own app? Sure. It's says 'We're cool.' But does every blog need its own app? Of course not," said Kevin O'Keefe, founder of [LexBlog](#) in Seattle, which provides blogging services for law firms.

If all your app does is promote what's already on your website and blog, this is "the wrong direction to go," said Daniel Friedlander, an attorney in Westlake Village, Calif. who blogs at [lawonmyphone](#).

"The challenge is, how do you get someone to download an app in the first place? Then once it's on their iPhone, how do you keep them coming back to use it? If it's just advertisement, it doesn't make sense. It has to offer a service," Friedlander said.

Friedlander has created two iPhone apps, one called Tally Pad, a counter that people use to keep score or count calories, and another for lawyers called Court Days, a tickler system that counts days that courts in various jurisdictions are open for purposes of keeping track of filing deadlines.

If you have a peculiar passion or an original idea that could help other attorneys or clients, an app can be a great way to put your own stamp on it.

"As long as you're providing something of value and getting known as someone who cares about a subject in which you practice, that's great," said O'Keefe.

Examples of useful apps might include collecting content in a specialized area or facilitating communications between people to make it easier for clients to do business, he said.

Some lawyers are taking the practical approach by creating apps that help clients solve legal problems.

"The whole purpose of an app is to serve a function," said Michelle May O'Neil, a Dallas family law attorney who has created two iPhone apps for people contemplating divorce.

The first, Cost and Prep, helps people calculate the hidden costs of divorce and gives clients a list of documents to bring to their lawyer.

The second, Estate Divider, lets spouses divvy up their assets on a spreadsheet that keeps a running total of the percentage going to each.

O'Neil said she began thinking about creating apps after buying her iPhone last spring and noticing a lack of "practical apps for grown-ups."

After a chance meeting with a techie tooling around with his iPhone at a Starbucks she hired him to develop the apps, which cost about \$3,000 each.

While O'Neil said that as a small firm owner she always has marketing in mind, she cannot say the apps have directly produced clients - yet.

"We've definitely gotten a lot of publicity and it's brought attention to our law practice," she said.

She noted that because her iPhone apps were featured on CNN and the Dallas Morning News, even opposing clients have mentioned using them.

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