Choosing a Lawyer Blog Software

Steve Matthews | July 2009

In a recent blog post, Avvo's Marketing Manager Conrad Saam published a feature comparison table for the various legal blogging platforms (http://avvoblog.com/2009/07/07/comparing-legal-blogging-platforms/). Unfortunately, the list included a number of inaccuracies, prompting responses from Kevin O'Keefe (http://avvoblog.com/2009/07/07/comparing-legal-blogging-platforms/#comment-48236) (for Lexblog), Rick Klau () (http://tins.rklau.com/2009/07/comparing-legal-blogging-platforms.html) (for Blogger), and a number of others. The list was also a pretty short, and seemed to be crafted to showcase Avvo's new entry (http://www.avvo.com/for_lawyers/avvo-blogs) into the market.

Ok, fair enough. That's Avvo's prerogative on their own blog, and Rick & Kevin did a fine job standing up for their services. But beyond the controversy, the post did raise a couple of very common questions:

1.   Which blog software & vendors are out there?, and
2.   How should lawyers make their decision on a provider?

Let's start with the second question. Picking a blog software is all about finding a *good fit*. It's a balance between your budget, your skills (and the skills of those you employ), the control you require over the software, and the amount of 'hand holding' necessary from your provider.

Broken down further:

- **Budget:** This one should be easy, but is often not. If you're spending dollars in this space, you quickly find out that your money is not going to software. Blog software is cheap, no matter who provides it. The cost comes from the added extras: a professional design, custom coding, functionality changes, software upgrades, training, backups, security, etc. Do you want someone to pick up the phone when things go wrong?

- **Skills:** The less money you spend, the more you need to be comfortable with the out-of-the-box (OOTB) product. And free, often equals OOTB plus your time (or the time of people you pay). This is a balance, however, and many people can create & manage a blog themselves, with the time committed varying case-by-case. The best advice I have to give to lawyers is: a) to value your time invested in extra blog management tasks, and b), to know the limits of your resources. 95% of the time, blogging is a simple painless process. But if you lose a couple of weeks each year *tinkering*, you need to consider whether this is a hobby or a business investment.

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'Building Web Profile for the Legal Industry'

- **Control:** Many of the hosted solutions restrict the design options and custom coding, so you need to be content with the product they are delivering. If you require complete control of the design and functionality of your blog, that can have a big influence on your decision. Wordpress, for example, has both a free hosted version (http://wordpress.com/), and an open source free download (http://wordpress.org/) that may be installed on your own servers (the former being a self-managed solution, and the later offering the most control). Feature wise, blog software are often very similar. So how do you differentiate? For me, the big factor is *design* flexibility. Either pick a provider that delivers that professional looking design, or choose a software with complete custom coding capability.

- **Hand holding:** Being a novice at anything is tough, and blogs are no exception. Most lawyers are good writers, but few are coders. Many seasoned bloggers often forget how many hours they've invested in learning this stuff. Personally, I think most new blogging lawyers would benefit from focusing on their transition to the first-person opinion-driven blog writing style. If you think you need training & advice, don't choose software. Choose a service provider.

Now for Part 2. Here's a list of some of the viable options out there. These are solutions, companies or software, that we have personal experience with. Depending on the circumstances, **any** of them may be a *good fit* to build or host a legal blog.

- **Hosted Wordpress** - Located at http://www.wordpress.com (not   .org). While it lacks in full control over the design and ability to modify code, the platform is very solid. You can apply your own domain name (recommended if you want to move your blog later); and if you're a CSS whiz, you can pay to apply your own custom template. *Good choice for:* the somewhat tech savvy & budget conscious. Comparable to Google's Blogger.

- **Self-hosted Wordpress** - Located at http://www.wordpress.org (not .com), where you download the software and install yourself. This is what we use for our own blogs here at Stem (http://www.stemlegal.com/). In my view, it offers the most control, but also requires the biggest investment. If you see Wordpress design themes for sale, or freelancers offering Wordpress design, it's more than likely for the self-hosted version. *Good choice for:* the most tech savvy, OR, a lawyer outsourcing development and wanting full control over the layout, design & functionality.

- **Lexblog** [http://www.lexblog.com] - Ignoring the colourful personality of the CEO, Lexblog remains the industry leader. We have a number of co-clients with them, and I do recommend Lexblog as a 'turn key' solution. As described in the budget item above, you don't hire Lexblog for their software. They're hired to execute my laundry list of *added extras*, and to answer the phone when you need help. *Good choice for:* the time conscious, less tech savvy, new bloggers.

- **Justia** [http://marketing.justia.com/content-lawyer-blogs.html] - Probably the second name out of most peoples' mouths when they think lawyer blogs (and perhaps the first for websites). Tim Stanley & Co. have an excellent industry reputation, and their blogs are prominent in many markets. *Good choice for:* same crowd as Lexblog, but for those that like Justia's blog designs better.

- **Google's Blogger** [https://www.blogger.com/] - This was my first blog software, and where I continue to host my personal blog (http://vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com/). For me, Blogger remains the simplest solution available, free or paid. I would strongly advise putting a domain name to your blog ($10/yr) before you start, so you have a migration path later. But short of some widget functionality (which can be hand coded into the templates), I have few complaints. *Good choice for:* those lacking tech skills, little to no budget, but want get going. Comparable to Hosted Wordpress.

- **G2 Web Media** [http://www.g2webmedia.com/] - Long time legal blogger Grant Griffiths, who also has a bootcamp introduction (http://www.blawginglawyers.com/) for new blogging lawyers, is a frequently missed alternative. G2 Web Media has some nice designs, and works as an intermediary using the self-hosted Wordpress solution. *Good choice for:* the lawyer who wants a unique blog design, custom functionality, but needs to outsource design & support.

- **Skunkworks** [http://www.skunkworks.ca/] - Our local friends up here in Canada, Skunkworks are another reliable developer option. Doug Jasinski and company have a combined background in both traditional media and advertising, along with some solid multi-platform blog designers. *Good choice for:* the lawyer that wants their blog to match firm branding efforts.

- **Drupal** [http://drupal.org/] - Drupal is one of most flexible CMS products I've worked with, but I'm hesitant to recommend it as a blog platform for individual lawyers. Especially for the less tech savvy. Where Drupal does fit in nicely is for community driven websites - a collaborative blog for a legal association perhaps. I put **Joomla** [http://www.joomla.org/]in this class too. Good CMS, but you'll be tinkering if you want to use it for blogging.

- **Movable Type** [http://www.movabletype.com/] & **Typepad** [http://www.typepad.com/] - Comparable to WP self-hosted and WP hosted, respectively. Movable Type is the core platform Lexblog uses, without LB's configuration bells & whistles. Typepad tends to be underrepresented in the legal market, and we don't currently host any clients there; but some colleagues do, and sing their praises.

There are undoubtedly others; especially more companies that build blogs for lawyers. But I can only work from personal experience here (so please don't email asking to be listed). Also understand that your decision is not carved in stone. As long as you **put your blog on a domain that you own** (did I say that enough times in this post?), you will be able to migrate to another platform in the future.

Good luck with your new blog!