

# Tools of the Trade: The Internet and Client Protection

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As an Assistant Counsel for a small, but busy, law client protection fund, it's no surprise that I juggle many responsibilities. In addition to the routine responsibilities of claims investigation and legal research at the New York Lawyers Fund, I help with statistical analysis, computer software and hardware configuration, and database programming. The experience offers great opportunities; and provides a near endless variety of tasks to make the work week more interesting.

Late in 1996, I was provided the opportunity to "stake out a domain in cyberspace" for the New York Lawyers Fund. Our goal: a presence on the World-Wide-Web.

By now, everyone knows something about the Internet. The media is fairly saturated with stuff about the "Information Super-Highway". What began as a military communications network and later a playground for scientists and "techie" has become one of the largest and most diverse sources of commercial, educational and entertainment information in the world.

Fueled by the availability of personal computer, millions of consumers "surf the Net" each day in search of information on an almost infinite menu of subjects, including the protection of law clients from dishonest conduct in the practice of law. On February 1, 1997, the New York Lawyers Fund went live on the Web. Our address: <http://www.nylawfund.org>. (Click here for sample screen.)

Why go Internet? Simple. The development of a Web Page permits the wide dissemination of important and helpful consumer protection information at modest cost. For example, we have posted the text of all our consumer information pamphlets, brochures and handbooks. The Page provides access to the texts of our Annual Reports and press releases. Visitors can also access a directory of all lawyer discipline committees in New York State, and all client protection funds in the United States.

Equally important, consumers and potential claimants (and their counsel) can review the text of our Board of Trustees' regulations, and download a reimbursement application. They can also e-mail the fund for additional information.

Developing a Web-Page is not a difficult. The first step (if you aren't already online) is to obtain an Internet "provider". An Internet provider is a company or service, which provides a local telephone connection to the Internet, usually for a monthly fee. Services such as America Online, Prodigy and Compuserve are the best known, but don't underestimate the ability of an Internet provider in your community to offer equal or better service. In addition, if you are not a computer programmer, most local providers can assist you in designing and maintaining your Web Site.

The cost of developing a Web-Site can vary depending on the level of graphics and inter-activity that you want to present. The best course is to keep things simple; the attention span of the average Web-browser is very short, and easy-to-understand menus are the most effective.

Once created, your Internet provider can post your Web Page on its server (or computer mainframe). You will be given a "web address" which is basically a command line identifying where your page can be located on the Internet.

The common Internet address includes a string of information, which identifies your server, and where to find you on its system. If you can spend a little more, it's a great idea to obtain your own "domain" on the Internet. That means applying for and registering your own unique web address (not unlike a personalized automobile license plate). Having your own domain name simplifies the search process and better identifies your fund. In our address, for example, the abbreviation "org" signifies our unique domain as an organization on the Internet.

Maintenance of your page can be painless. Most likely, you will never have to change the design of your page. Adding new documents or links to your existing page is easy to learn, and is a service that is offered by your Internet provider.

Whatever one thinks about the computer age, one thing remains certain: the Internet and the World-Wide-Web signal vast changes in store in the fields of legal research, communication, and information gathering and sharing. Besides that, surfing on the Net can be fun, and that's not so bad.