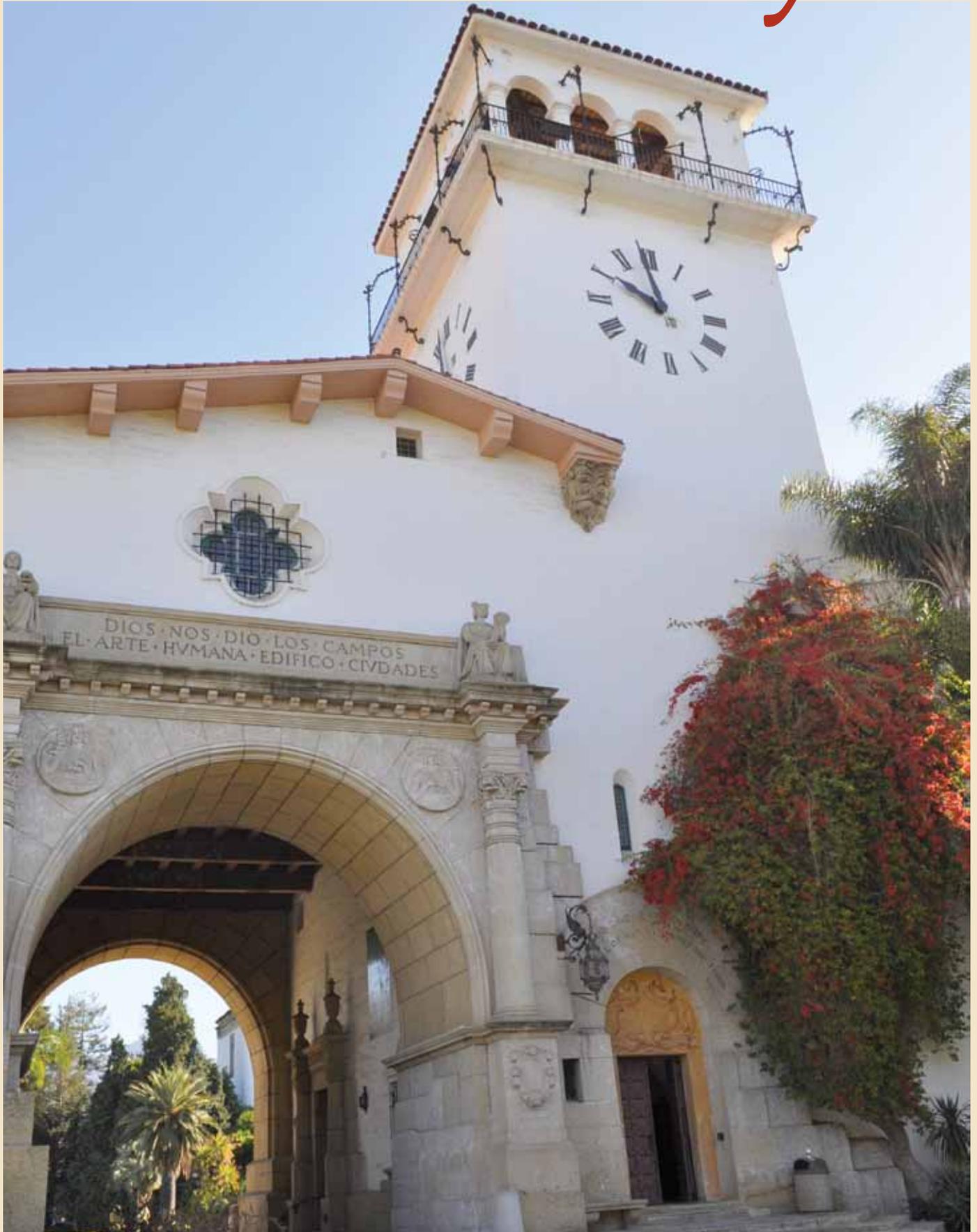


Santa Barbara Lawyer

Official Publication of the Santa Barbara County Bar Association
April 2013 • Issue 487



Are you a Law.Pro? New Domain Extensions for Attorneys

BY ROBERT W. OLSON, JR., JD

Introduction: Although the seeds of the Internet were planted over 50 years ago, only in the past 20 years has the Internet become part of the legal profession. The gold rush on domain names and the novelty of legal websites of the 1990s has settled into mostly “cookie cutter” legal websites in the 2000s. One thing hasn’t changed, however: legal websites tend to serve as little more than online billboards announcing a firm’s existence in the legal community. The future will not be so staid. A set of domain name extensions specifically reserved for attorneys is now available, providing powerful opportunities to brand and market a legal practice (particularly for small firms and solo practitioners).

Birth of the Internet: 1958-1977. In 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower created the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in response to the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik. One ARPA mission was to create a network to link different computers with different operating systems and remote locations, so in the event of nuclear attack, the destruction of one computer or connection would not interrupt operations or communications of the others. ARPANET first became operational in 1969, but in 1977, other small governmental and educational computer networks found ways to attach their networks to ARPANET’s network and each other through inter-networking. The “Internet” was born.

Hypertext and Domain Name: 1980-1990. Around 1980, Tim Berners-Lee came up with the idea of using “hypertext” to link Internet pages with each other, and expanded and improved this work through the 1980s (he also invented a text-browsing system to navigate the actual content of Internet pages, now called the World Wide Web or WWW). In 1983, while Berners-Lee was working on hypertext protocols, the Domain Name System (DNS) was created to translate numerical Internet addresses into natural language, including the first domain extensions (including “.com” for commercial use). For the first time, an enterprise could be known by a domain name (e.g., transdental.com)

rather than as an incomprehensible number. Unfortunately, commercial use of the Internet was still prohibited, so there was not much incentive for businesses to obtain .com domains other than to protect an existing trademark. The first “.com” domain ever registered was Symbolics.com, issued on March 15, 1985, but it took another 2½ years to issue the 100th “.com” domain name.

Netscape: 1993-1994. In 1993, nine years after creation of the “.com” extension, commercial use of the Internet was finally allowed. One month later, the WWW became available for everyone at no cost. These changes shifted the landscape completely, and Mosaic took immediate advantage. Mosaic was first released in February 1993 (later revised and renamed Netscape Navigator). Mosaic/Netscape was a web browser with two big differences. It allowed users to view text and images simultaneously on a web page (never before accomplished) and introduced the familiar “point and click” interface for hypertext links to other web pages. It too was provided for free. This browser, combined with free WWW navigation tools and permission for commercial use, took the Internet from a technical curiosity to a mainstream market monster. Business rushed headlong into the game.

The Gold Rush: 1994-2000. Part of the game was the use of natural language to hunt the Internet for relevant web pages, and for business to find ways to capture that traffic. This created a “gold rush” for the limited number of domain names that included popular generic search terms (e.g., “Miami lawyer”) that had high commercial value. Some registered domains containing well known business names demanded ransoms from the trademark owner, but trademark law forced them to surrender these domains without payment. In fact, it was the generic domain names that made all the money. Business.com sold for \$345 million in 2007 with only \$15 million in annual sales (after selling for \$7.5 million in 1999); sex.com sold for \$14 million in 2006; and insure.com for \$16 million in 2009. Numerous other domain names have sold for over \$1 million.

Attorney Domains: 1994-2008. The now defunct law firm of Heller Ehrman White & McAuliffe LLP is said to have launched the first legal website, obtaining “heller.com” on March 12, 1994. Many law firms were creating websites by 1995 and were able to register a tight version of their firm name as their domain name. Generic domain names were picked up by websites like findlaw.com (1995) and lawyers.com (1998) for legal marketing, and some prescient attorneys obtained generic names such as NewYorkLawyer.com (1997) for their private law offices. Those who were not so quick were left to register a domain name with a less than perfect version of their firm name. The legal profession,

like every other business, would start finding it difficult to obtain an appropriate domain name. Certainly, a law firm could buy their favored domain name at an inflated price. It seemed the chance to get a perfect domain name was gone after 2000.

Law.Pro Domains: All of which brings us to today. Licensed professionals are permitted to own domain names with the new domain extension “.pro” (standing for professional). Furthermore, licensed attorneys are permitted to own domains with the new extension law.pro, jur.pro and bar.pro.

Security Benefits: These new domain names provide attorneys with broad email authentication, security, and encryption features. These features not only allow an attorney to send secure email via “public key” encryption technology, but they also (1) authenticate the attorney as the sender, (2) guarantee the content of the email and any attachments are unchanged, and (3) prove that the sender actually sent the email. The details are best left to your Internet service provider and webmaster, but the need to use these features is clear. Attorneys have a duty of confidentiality to their clients, and it is only a matter of time before the standard of care will require attorneys to use secure communications concerning all client matters. While available as an add-on to any email system, “.pro” email provides proof that your firm provides secure communications.

Marketing Benefits: The Law.Pro domain also provides entirely new marketing and branding options, rivaling the opportunities of the 1990s. Now, law firms have another chance to get the exact domain name they want, and the competition for these names will be much smaller for law.pro domains. Furthermore, there is an obvious cachet to being a “law pro.” Other extensions like .biz have been available for some time, but they have never caught on with the business community; they simply do not have the “ring” of a serious enterprise. However, an attorney whose domain proclaims him to be “JohnReyes.Law.Pro” has a marketing hook that JohnReyes.biz does not. I believe the cachet of being a “Law.Pro” ultimately could easily become essential to small firm marketing.

Search Benefits: Generic domain names have even stronger marketing benefits. Consider an attorney who is branded as the Trial.Law.Pro. While JohnReyes.Law.Pro resonates, Trial.Law.Pro takes that resonance a step further. This marketing phrase is an immensely powerful and exclusive marketing tool, with enormous cachet and memorability. A generic name is also of huge benefit for Internet marketing. A potential client looking for a trial lawyer would search “trial lawyer” on their web browser. If the search terms match a website’s domain name, that

website is pushed higher up on the search results. Hence, the trial.law.pro will have a natural placement advantage over any other trial attorney’s website in relation to those particular search terms.

Small Firm Benefits: The immediate benefits of Law.Pro branding and Internet search placement should be particularly felt by smaller and newer law firms, especially if their specialty relies on advertising to generate new clients. Yellow page advertising is extremely expensive, with long term contracts and content subject to changes only on a yearly basis. Also, the best ad placements are given to advertisers who buy the most pages and have the longest advertising history; new players have no way to compete with the established law firms. By comparison, Internet marketing is far less inexpensive, infinitely adaptable and expandable, easily targeted to specific practice areas and geographic locations, and (with the right domain and web design) provides web search placement ahead of bigger and more established competitors.

Conclusion: It appears that search engine marketing already has overtaken yellow pages advertising as the primary source of new legal clients. In particular, Yahoo released a study in late 2008 that showed that 62% of consumers now use the Internet to research attorneys, and equal numbers of consumers (36%) used search engines and the yellow pages. The equity markets recognize the problem all too well; the two biggest yellow page publishers in 2007 (R.H. Donnelly and IDEARC) both have gone through bankruptcy after being de-listed from the New York Stock Exchange. Considering these consumer trends and the extraordinary cost advantages enjoyed by search engine campaigns, the need to have a strong Internet marketing plan is clear, and starting with a Law.Pro domain name seems to be the best way to get there. ■

Robert W. Olson, Jr., is in private practice in Santa Barbara, California and launched his first website TransDental.com® in 1997.



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