By Maddy Martin

What are some issues today that keep lawyers in small firms up at night? One issue is the work they have to do with existing clients; there is almost always a mountain of paperwork on their desks 24/7. Another issue is trying to run their practices. There is never enough time in the day to get to the everyday tasks required to run the “business side” of a law practice. A third item, one that many lawyers often dread talking about, is the idea of keeping the pipeline of prospective clients filled. How do successful attorneys do all the above and still manage to get a good night of sleep?

One answer might be website chat. Believe it or not, one of the best channels to engage with prospective clients is your website. Unfortunately, most lawyers think they have too little web traffic or clients that simply won’t engage with anything other than a human being; both myths are incorrect. A mistake often made by attorneys who personally don’t like website chat is to impose that bias by not putting it on their own websites even though clients prefer it.

Think about it this way:
• 82% of consumers expect an immediate response to a service inquiry
• 67% of potential clients base their decision to hire on the attorney’s initial responsiveness to their first call or email
• 33% of potential law firm clients feel “urgency” to hire a lawyer, yet just 15% of attorneys sense these clients’ “urgency”

Further, 76% of attorneys report being overworked, according to the 2019 Clio Legal Trends Report, and a majority say they lack “business” training, acumen, confidence, or a mix of all three (clio.com/resources/legal-trends/2019-report).

What gives lawyers the ability and bandwidth to meet the demands of clients and their revenue goals, while getting lawyering work done? Technology.

In large part, technology sets the stage for client expectations. Faster, cheaper, better...blame technology for those demands. But it’s also the solution, and when it comes to communications, specifically, it’s cheap, easy to use, and remarkably effective for law firms and clients alike. Drilling down into the absolute cheapest and easiest of all technologies, we arrive at website chat, and that’s the focus of this article, because it’s free, creates no interruptions, and works magically to respond, screen and capture new clients, while you remain focused on work.

Consider this: In most instances, the first step taken by someone looking for legal advice is to go online and do some research. Even if they’re a referral, they will still visit your website before calling (assuming you have a website, which I really hope you do).

The difference between keeping their attention and losing them to another referral or the Google search results page hinges on your ability to answer a few simple questions: Do you offer the legal services I need? In my area? At a price I can afford? And when I need you (now or soon)?

Website chat benefits both the prospect and you here. Before they interrupt with a call or email, before they even know if you’re the right firm for their needs, they can receive information from a chatbot that you’ve loaded with answers to common questions, and steps to take if the lead is a good prospect (e.g., you actually want them to hire you).

Web chat not only helps potential clients instantly evaluate whether their needs match your firm’s areas of expertise, it also steers good leads toward the next desired step: likely, a consultation. Chatbots can be programmed to do this, or chat can be live-staffed for a more hands-on approach.

The result? More leads captured, more quality consultations booked and better marketing return-on-investment (a.k.a. ROI). In a recent marketing case study, new leads came through a law firm’s website chat widget 10 times more than any other marketing communication channel.

As Matt Burke, founder and CEO of Zillametrics, puts it, “People want fast answers and live chat makes that possible...Every lawyer who pays for marketing should have live chat.” (You can read his full report on the Smith.ai Blog.)
Once you have a chat widget installed on your site, the sky’s the limit – you can funnel leads into your email marketing nurturing “drips,” you can connect Facebook Messenger and a text-enabled business number to your chatbot for consistent responses across every communication channel and you can even forward new chat leads to a virtual receptionist service or in-office staff dedicated to new-client intake and retention.

However you choose to implement chat, as a lawyer, it’s critical you set clear expectations with new client prospects, ethically. *Web chat engagements don’t establish an attorney-client relationship, nor do they constitute legal advice.* Make sure your website chat widget clearly discloses this with a pre-chat disclaimer prior to the start of any conversation. We’ve developed a mini guide on this with examples of effective disclaimers on the Smith.ai Blog.

However you choose to engage with clients, consider the value of your time, your business goals and skills, relevant professional conduct requirements, and the preferences of potential clients. The more you focus on leveraging technology rather than resisting (or deflecting, or ignoring) it, the more these essential aspects of running a successful, sustainable law firm will be aligned.

Maddy Martin is the head of growth and education at Smith.ai, which provides superior virtual receptionist services for live calls and web chat, through a combination of U.S.-based professional receptionists and AI technology. She has spent the last decade growing tech startups from New York to California, and has expertise in digital marketing, small business communications, lead conversion, email marketing, SEO, and event marketing. Maddy can be reached at maddy@smith.ai, and you can also connect with her on LinkedIn.