

Website raises Clark Wilson LLP's profile in real estate

By Monte Stewart

Vancouver

Five years ago, Darren Donnelly and Steve Matthews of Vancouver-based law firm Clark Wilson LLP wanted to create a website to help current and future clients find information related to real estate transactions.

Donnelly, a lawyer and partner who heads Clark Wilson's commercial real estate group, and Matthews, the firm's knowledge services director, thought the site would save clients - and the firm's lawyers and support staff - the time and hassle of searching for documents and forms. But the firm's other staff, from partners to paralegals, weren't thrilled with the idea.

"There was skepticism at first - for sure - just because people didn't see the value of directing [clients and potential clients] to the website," said Donnelly. "There were, maybe, some older partners who wondered why we would give away things for free ..."

Nobody is questioning the site's value now. BCRELinks.com (www.bcrelinks.com), designed to facilitate a commercial real estate agreement, has become a staple of the B.C. real estate industry - and boosted Clark Wilson's business.

Since the site dubbed "the deal maker's toolbox" was launched in August 2002, Clark Wilson's real estate group has doubled, said Donnelly. The firm recently hired two new associates, increasing its stable of real estate lawyers to 17. Meanwhile, real estate-related billings have tripled.

"For marketing, [the] No. 1 [benefit] is profile," said Donnelly. "If we talk to anyone in the real estate industry for the first time, it would be very rare that they haven't heard of us. Even if they haven't heard of us specifically, they certainly know of BCRELinks.

"It's also changed our profile, and improved our profile, in terms of being seen as part of the [real estate] industry - as opposed to being someone on the outside hoping to serve the industry."

On average, 9,000 unique visitors - ranging from developers to industry analysts to out-of-province law firms looking for a B.C. representative - check out BCRELinks.com each month. (Unique visitors refer to different people who have visited a website, as opposed to one person who re-visits.)

BCRELinks.com enables visitors to download legal and real estate documents and forms, along with regulations and legislation. Visitors can also peruse articles written by the firm's lawyers; read the latest industry news and market reports; and link to media websites, industry associations, financial institutions and government organizations.

Clark Wilson lawyers supply some of the articles and documents, while visitors are also linked to several other sites. Several government and non-governmental organizations, including the B.C. Assessment Authority and National Library of Canada, link to the site.

Every downloadable document on BCRELinks.com is free - along with everything else.

Surfers do not have to become clients. Nor do they have to subscribe or disclose any private or personal information.

This user-friendly approach is helping the firm, which only operates in B.C., gain national and international recognition. The site garnered a 2004-05 Internet Marketing Attorney Nifty 50 Award. The awards go to 50 sites that contain features or components that are unique or different from a general law firm website.

More than 1,000 firms have been nominated since the awards were launched in 2001. But Micah Buchdahl, a Moorestown, N.J.-based lawyer who founded the awards and hands them out annually, estimated "less than six" Canadian companies have captured one.

Buchdahl, also secretary of the American Bar Association's Law Practice Management Section, praised Clark Wilson for doing an "extraordinary job" of marketing legal services to business and consumer audiences alike.

"Firms significantly larger do not come close to showing off who they are and what they do like Clark Wilson has accomplished on the Web," said Buchdahl.

But Donnelly stressed BCRELinks.com's purpose is to serve the industry - not showcase the firm. He said the site shares information and spares the client unwanted expenses.

"When they come to see us, then we're going to start doing the real legal work and give them real value - as opposed to spending the first \$5,000 of their money helping them to gather [documents and information]," said Donnelly.

"And we've built goodwill before they even walk through the door," added Matthews.

The site's most popular document - a letter of intent - has been downloaded 7,800 times. Most legal documents are actually templates that can be revised for each transaction.

Legal marketer Buchdahl said a site like BCRELinks.com can be "a tie-breaker" when a potential client is evaluating several firms that provide essentially the same services.

"It provides added-value to current clients and shows specific areas of expertise - beyond the usual law firm marketing fare - to those that are not as familiar with the firm," said Buchdahl.

BCRELinks.com also connects its visitors to realtors, appraisers, lending agencies and government organizations that are involved in transactions - along with media outlets, industry news sites, real estate boards, construction associations and other industry groups. An interactive events calendar also allows some event organizers to insert and update their own blurbs while others are posted by firm personnel.

While serving the real estate sector, BCRELinks.com also connects 700-1,000 visitors per month to Clark Wilson's main website - www.cwilson.com. Visitors check out the firm's other services by choice - not chance or chicanery - simply by clicking on a link available at the top of each BCRELinks.com page.

Clark Wilson, started in 1911 by childhood chums John Arthur Clark and Alexander Wilson, offers business and personal legal services ranging from estate planning to environment law. The firm houses more than 70 lawyers and 125 support staff.

The real estate site is part of Clark Wilson's comprehensive Web package. The firm publishes 15 free industry newsletters, distributed to more than 10,000 subscribers, as well as its recently launched Canadian Trademark blog.

Said Matthews: "We use a hub-in-the-wheel approach where you see altruistic, doing-good-things-for-communities

websites on the outside. And in the middle of that wheel is the Clark Wilson website, where we'll give you more of a sales pitch or [explain] more of the services that we offer and describe our expertise."

Now, said Matthews, a librarian and Web developer who also oversees the firm's online marketing, BCRELlinks.com has assumed "a life of its own." Such liveliness is the key to a legal marketing site's success, said Nifty 50 Awards founder Buchdahl.

He warned that a site operator's top priority is to keep content fresh and links alive. Nothing is worse than a "dead link" that strands a visitor somewhere in cyberspace.

"There is no such thing as finishing a website," concluded Buchdahl.