



CASE STUDY 
TOP PORTLAND LAW FIRM

CASE STUDY: WEBSITE REDESIGN OF A TOP PORTLAND LAW FIRM

This case study is from a current client of ours. We were approached by them to finish a redesign project that was projected to take six weeks and had dragged on to take over a year. We agreed to clean up the design, recode the website, add some custom features and install a content management system in exchange for the opportunity to write an anonymous case study about their experience. We were also paid hourly for our work completing the project.

We believe this is an instructive example of what can go wrong in a website redesign project, and is an educational tool for organizations looking to update or redesign their website. We believe that this case study illustrates the importance of having a good process, a commitment to good communication, and, especially, the huge cost in staff time to an organization when a project falls apart and there is no process for getting it back on track.

Real names have not been used for any of the parties in this case study.

SALES PROCESS

In 2007 a top Portland law firm, Smith & Smith, with over 20 attorneys and offices in multiple states decided to redesign its current website, which had been developed by a friend of one of the partners. They interviewed four web agencies for their website redesign project, all locally based. One agency was large-sized (over 20 employees), two were medium-sized (5-10 employees), and one was a sole proprietorship.

The project was awarded to the largest of the four firms, WebSolutions, LLC, largely on the basis of a portfolio that was “high-tech, flashy, and modern.” The bid from WebSolutions was the highest of the four proposals, but Smith & Smith selected them because they “did not know what they wanted and wanted someone else to tell them what they needed. [WebSolutions] wowed them by selling an image of the new website being ‘younger, sexier, hipper.’” While WebSolutions’ sales representative, Tim, was not impressive in his presentation or follow up, the strength

of their portfolio and the apparent strength of the WebSolutions development process were very impressive to Smith & Smith. Another key selling point was the claim that the website could be turned around in six weeks, the quickest timeline of any of the proposals received. Smith & Smith had a budget of \$20k for the website project, their current website had approximately 30 pages, and they had a 7-person website committee that included three partners. The collective billable rate for this website committee was over \$1,000/hour.

Smith & Smith had one primary point of contact for their organization: a paralegal named Jeff

DESIGN & DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Sales to Production Handoff

Smith & Smith was passed from the sales representative, Tim, to a project manager, Dave, when the proposal was signed. While Smith & Smith thought this was understandable, it was their expectation that the Tim would be involved in the process to some extent, and they never interacted with him again.

WebSolutions never requested a single point of contact from Smith & Smith and never formalized a communication process for interacting with their client. WebSolutions did present a very clear timeline for completing the project in six weeks, including deliverables on each party. Within three weeks the project deviated from the timeline that had been presented, and from this point on Smith & Smith never saw an updated timeline for completing the project.

Background and Competitive Research

There was no research done on key competitors to the firm, no analysis of existing web analytics data, no testing of the current website with visitors to find areas for improvement, and no attempt to survey current customers or prospects for ideas to improve their experience using the website.

Information Architecture (Website Organization and Functionality Definition)

To start the project, WebSolutions requested a site map (how content is organized on the website) from Jeff, the paralegal at Smith & Smith. In response, he provided a bulleted list of pages on the current site with some minor changes. WebSolutions did not provide any feedback on the sitemap from Jeff. The information architecture process did not involve any communication of overall project goals, written recommendations for the new website, or wireframes of the new website (wireframes are similar to blueprints in an architectural process).

Content Writing

There was no discussion of website content other than that Smith & Smith would write and edit it internally. There was no plan for how content would be delivered or what the format would be. WebSolutions did not provide any guidelines on best practices for web content writing.

Design

The design process was started with a designer named Allison, with whom Smith & Smith would communicate directly, though only via email. Allison provided them with multiple homepage design options that Smith & Smith thought were high-quality, but not exactly what they wanted. The process ground to a halt as Smith & Smith felt that they had to not only give feedback, but overall creative direction to the design. One month into the design process, the original project manager stopped responding to emails, and all communication was with Allison. Six weeks later a new project manager, Veronica, started appearing CC'd on emails, though no formal introduction was made.

Smith & Smith found Allison difficult to work with, “not a people person,” and she seemed to take all feedback on the designs as a personal attack. After the initial design presentation, the law firm was never again presented with multiple options for anything they requested. Allison responded with frustration in an email when the law firm requested custom photos for the website and said that WebSolutions could not help with this request. Smith & Smith agreed to find a photographer to take the photos, but this resulted in major delays to the design process while the

new photos were shot. All told, the homepage design and custom photos consumed over six months of time.

Jeff made multiple requests for WebSolutions to come in to Smith & Smith's offices in downtown Portland, but was turned down each time. Veronica, the new project manager, said that they preferred to work by email, though occasional phone calls were possible.

To complete the design process, the paralegal, Jeff, scheduled a face-to-face meeting at WebSolutions' offices (20 minutes drive from downtown Portland), saying that Smith & Smith would do nothing more on the website and pay no more bills until they were able to meet in person. In the face-to-face meeting, Jeff met with Veronica and Allison. Allison "ranted for an hour" at the beginning of the meeting about the difficulties in working with Smith & Smith. After this hour, Veronica and Jeff were able to talk more reasonably about the project; Jeff left the meeting feeling really good about the site and getting the changes made that Smith & Smith wanted.

Programming

Shortly after the in-person meeting, a third project manager, Alex, was assigned to the project by WebSolutions. Jeff thought the previous project manager, Veronica, understood the process and was good to work with, but in their estimation her replacement, Alex, did not know anything about the project and seemed very inexperienced in dealing with clients. WebSolutions lost several of the photos that they had sent to Jeff in the early stages of the design process and said that this was because of the delays in completing the project. Content was sent piecemeal to WebSolutions by Jeff and there was no plan for getting it all onto the website. By this point, Smith & Smith felt like they were personally steering the project towards completion, and that it was a major effort to get anything done. They never saw the new website in its entirety because pages were always sent as individual links, and links to other pages would usually be broken. Content updates and edits usually took several weeks to get done, and they were seldom done correctly or completely. In one case, a sentence that read "in behalf of" was supposed to be

changed to “on behalf of.” The page that was sent back to the law firm had a zero instead of an “o” in the text “On behalf of.” Several elements of the site that they thought had been decided on (background color, a band of color at the top of the site, etc.) would change in the different mockups that they would be sent.

Additional Notes

- In general, Smith & Smith felt that WebSolutions was not receptive to changes and was very slow and dismissive in their communications. Jeff expressed the belief that much of this could have been resolved if face-to-face meetings would have been part of the process.
- Smith & Smith acknowledged responsibility for many of the delays. Some of the partners on the website committee were very active in coming up with ideas, many of which contradicted previous decisions that had been sent to WebSolutions.
- Jeff estimated that he spent approximately 10-15 hours a week for the entire 11 month process. As he has major billable time responsibilities, this became a serious problem for him getting his work done. At the low end of this estimate, this equals approximately \$72,000 of lost billable time based on his billable rate of \$150/hour. When the time of the entire committee is added from their meetings both internally and with WebSolutions, the lost billable time increases by another \$30,000. This comes to over \$100,000 in lost revenue due to the web project.
- The time that the website committee spent on the project had a major impact on Smith & Smith’s ability to meet revenue goals.
- The project came in under budget, because towards the end Smith & Smith removed several components from the proposal to speed up the launch. These included search engine optimization, several additional pages from the site, and other design ideas.
- Even when launched, the site had numerous errors such as misspellings, broken links, and formatting bugs.
- After launch, Smith & Smith immediately moved the hosting of the website to another local provider so that they could not be beholden to WebSolutions for updates and changes.

Postscript

Synotac Web Design programmed and completed the website in five weeks of work, for approximately 25% of the total initial project estimate by WebSolutions. The updated website included a content management system that allows Smith & Smith to edit all of the content on the website, including images and files, as well as to add additional pages.