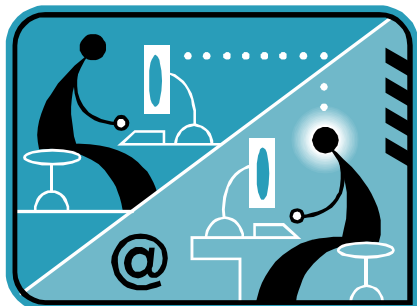


EXTRANETS

And why most firms should have them
(Aug 05)



I was tempted to make this section part of the previous piece on panel solicitors but on reflection it deserves its own section as it is a solicitor/client communications issue.

Whether readers agree with LBP's take on how the future will pan out in regulatory terms or how panel solicitors should control their external service providers, one factor is inescapable: CLIENTS WANT MORE AND BETTER COMMUNICATION from their service providers. Simple analysis of formal and informal complaints is just one way to confirm this: the greatest cause for complaint is lack of quality solicitor/client communication. Managing client expectations is a key component to developing lasting client relationships and winning repeat instructions (client surveys confirm this.) LBP already has a standardised client-service product available.

The use of extranets is now a simple and effective way of communicating with clients at a 'passive' and 'active' level. At the risk of patronising the technically sophisticated reader I will explain how an extranet works. Essentially it is a secure part of a law firm's server dedicated to providing information, and a direct communication conduit. When enabled, a typical law firm will operate these when any active file is running – usually with a minimum value threshold. This could be as low as \$5,000, though can be set at any level. The range of data displayed is entirely variable but could, in a litigation file, include the following:

- A time and cost budget and current performance against it.
- A time line with key milestones – judicial conferences, dates for Briefs of Evidence, hearing dates, etc
- The identification of key personnel and a brief description of their role
- Disbursements (value, times and dates)
- Interim billing dates
- A communications option enabling emails to be sent directly to key personnel
- A notice board
- Copies of correspondence

The profile of the extranet can be varied to suit the type of current matter, if desired. When an extranet facility is in place fewer surprises occur and opportunities exist for the client to consider their options (e.g. ADR/mediation etc). Moreover, when the client can see what the progress of the matter actually entails the value concept becomes clearer and satisfaction levels are enhanced. Costs for setting up services of this type need not be excessive and may be part of a pre-existing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) package. Whilst the number of clients who demand them is currently small it is our view they are set to grow and quickly. LBP can assist in defining your extranet requirements as required.