

Are You There Yet?

UK Law Firms on Wikipedia

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Summary

Wikipedia is a very widely used online encyclopedia, containing a huge array of reference content that can be edited by anyone. Law firms can gain significant additional visibility by having an article on Wikipedia, but they need to be aware of both the culture of the site and the policies governing content on it.

This white paper presents background on Wikipedia, recently gathered metrics on how top UK law firms are currently represented on Wikipedia, and guidance on editing and monitoring changes to Wikipedia content.

Article

Amidst all the current hype around social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, it would be easy to miss the increasing importance of another "Web 2.0" phenomenon - Wikipedia.

The concept of Wikipedia is very simple: it's an online encyclopedia. The aspects that make it unique are its scope (over 3 million articles in English currently, with over 14 million in total) and its openness - content within it can be freely created and edited by anyone, using nothing more than a browser. That's right, anyone - much more on that point later in this paper. It is certainly not a perfect source and errors in the content are not unheard of, but it has more than enough unique attributes to outweigh occasional inaccuracies.

Wikipedia has grown enormously since its launch in January 2001. According to web traffic monitoring site alexa.com, in February 2010 Wikipedia was the 6th most visited site on the entire web (behind Facebook in 2nd, but some way ahead of Twitter in 12th). It is visited by 1 in 8 of all internet users, who spend an average of 5 minutes per day on the site. Wikipedia has always been avowedly non-commercial, funded by a mixture of private and corporate donors. Most recently Google donated \$2m to the Wikimedia Foundation, the organisation that runs Wikipedia.

Many lawyers will already routinely use Wikipedia as a general research tool in their work. Its emphasis on neutrality and the inclusion of citations within articles, together with extensive cross-referencing and the sheer scope of the content, make it extremely valuable. It contains articles on virtually all major public organisations (all of the UK FTSE350 companies for example) and many prominent individuals, alongside a whole array of other reference material.

For exactly the same reasons, anyone seeking information about law firms - for example potential clients, or trainees researching which law firms they should apply to - will also regard Wikipedia as a useful resource. Even if they don't search Wikipedia directly, a Google search on a law firm's name will invariably include a link to the firm's Wikipedia article (if it has one) on the first page of results.

Wikipedia's own traffic statistics bear this out - of the existing articles about individual UK law firms, the 10 most popular were viewed in total over 400,000 times during 2009. The single most popular article (on Clifford Chance) was viewed just under 20,000 times in the 3 months from November 2009 to January 2010 alone - that's over 200 views a day.

Given all of the above, it's somewhat surprising to find that 40 of the top 100 UK law firms still have no Wikipedia article. Firms including Shoosmiths, Kennedys, Walker Morris, Osborne Clarke and Macfarlanes are not represented, except on general lists of firms. Those firms that are present have been added gradually - the earliest articles (on Shearman & Sterling, Jones Day, Linklaters and Baker & McKenzie) were created in 2004, the most recent (on Wragge & Co) was added in January 2010.

So should a law firm see a Wikipedia article as just another weapon in its promotional arsenal? Well - yes and no. A well written, well presented, factually accurate article about the firm can only enhance the firm's presence and image on the web. But there are two key points to understand. Firstly, that Wikipedia articles must be written from an entirely neutral and factual point of view. Secondly, that (with a few exceptions) articles in Wikipedia are not owned and can be edited by anyone.

A popular misconception is that Wikipedia is something of a free-for-all. In fact, an extensive framework of content policies and guidelines has evolved, policed by a combination of automated processes ("bots"), and interested individuals who monitor new and edited content to ensure compliance with the policies. These policies are indeed enforced - as an example, within the last few months one UK top 100 law firm had its entry completely removed for being written too much like an advertisement (it has since been reinstated in a rather less promotional tone). At the time of writing, entries for 5 other firms are prominently flagged as being potentially biased, with 16 in total flagged as requiring significant improvements.

At the time of writing, there are well over 150,000 active contributors to the English language Wikipedia. Although anyone can edit content on Wikipedia, the process is not entirely anonymous and at a minimum the editor's internet address will be recorded and could potentially be traced. Wikipedia recommend that all contributors create a named user account, and this becomes a requirement if you want to create a new article rather than just edit existing ones. Editing can be a frequent occurrence - 7 of the articles on the UK top 100 law firms have been edited more than 50 times in the last 6 months, and for two of those firms there were more than 30 different contributors making changes or comments over the period.

Although the great majority of changes made are beneficial (in the widest sense), there are occasional incidents of vandalism where an article is edited maliciously in a way that compromises the integrity of Wikipedia. In most cases such vandalism is easy to spot and easy to reverse, and persistent offenders can be blocked. A more subtle form of vandalism is the use of a so-called "sock puppet", an alternate identity created specifically for the purpose of making misleading or biased contributions.

For law firms wishing to contribute to Wikipedia, the best advice is to create a single user account for making their contributions, but to make it publically clear that the user account is associated with the firm. There is no reason that a firm shouldn't create or edit its own article or indeed any other Wikipedia content, but it should always declare its interest and always ensure that the contributions it makes are neutral, never promotional or self-aggrandising. Adding neutral content is much better than having no content at all, and very much better than adding obviously promotional content that is subsequently tagged as such and removed. Copy from the firm's brochure or web site is likely to need some judicious editing before it would be appropriate for Wikipedia.

A firm contributing content should also remember that it does not own the content about itself, nor does it have any more control over that content than any other user. Anyone is free to edit that content, provided they stick to the content policies and guidelines. Stories about Wikipedia pages being "hijacked" demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of how Wikipedia works. You may want to include a section about the pro bono work your firm does; others may want to add a comment on some less savoury aspect of the firm's operations - both have a place, so long as both are factual and neutrally presented.

In that context, the need to monitor changes to your firm's article (and indeed other relevant articles) so that inaccuracies can be corrected swiftly is clear. A range of tools is available - Wikipedia provides the ability for a logged in user to create their own watch list of articles in which they have an interest so that any changes to those articles can be highlighted whenever the user logs in. Also, the edit history for any article is available as an RSS feed so that changes can be monitored without having to visit the Wikipedia site itself.

Fellsoft Limited has developed FeedWatch™, an RSS integration application for the LexisNexis® InterAction® CRM system widely used in law firms across the world. FeedWatch enables any RSS feed to be connected to the InterAction contacts to which it relates, and it has a wide range of uses. In the context of Wikipedia, it allows the edit history of any article to be connected to the related contact in InterAction - so that whenever a monitored Wikipedia article is edited, an activity is automatically created on the related contact in InterAction, bringing the edit to the attention of anyone interested in that contact. FeedWatch can provide unobtrusive monitoring of the Wikipedia entry for your firm, as well as those of your clients, prospects and competitors. More information about FeedWatch is available on our [web site](#).

References

[Top 50 firms that get Wikipedia - and those that don't](#) (lawgazette.co.uk, May 2009)

[Can A Wikipedia Entry Help Your Law Firm?](#) (legalmarketingblawg.com, June 2009)

[Does Your Law Firm Have a Wikipedia Page?](#) (legalblogwatch.com, May 2009)

[Blake Dawson's Wikipedia Page Hijacked](#) (thelawyer.com, March 2009)

Fellsoft Limited was founded by Simon Ellison-Bunce in October 2009 and is focused on providing add-ons and integration products for LexisNexis® InterAction®, the leading CRM software solution for relationship-based organisations and professional services firms.

Simon started his career in legal IT and CRM when he joined Tikit in 1997. He led the early UK implementations of InterAction, and became the first InterAction Certified Professional outside the USA. Later, he was responsible for the design and development of E-Merge and ReAction Server, Tikit's very successful deeply integrated eMarketing solution for InterAction which has over 200 customers worldwide.

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