

THE PRACTICE MANAGER

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THE TECHNOLOGY ROUNDUP

Gerry Morris, J.D.

Another Voice Over IP Alternative

Several columns ago I wrote about voice over IP (VOIP) phone systems as an alternative to traditional Ma Bell type hard wired phones. VOIP systems convert the analogue sound to digital information that is then transmitted over the Internet and again converted to analogue sound on the other end.



The advantage of VOIP systems over traditional systems is lower monthly cost for the same features and minimal capital investment. The downside has historically been inferior sound quality and consistency. We all know that the Internet has good days and slow days. Sound quality for a VOIP system depends on consistent Internet speed. From my conversations with my colleagues that have made the jump to VOIP I've learned that the quality has improved dramatically to the point where it is seldom an issue.

In the past year I faced having to make the choice between buying out my office mate's share of our Panasonic phone and voicemail system or starting over from scratch. As it turned out my office mate moved to an office where it would have been impractical to install our phone system so I kept it. Before I decided to keep my existing system, however, I looked into VOIP.

At the time the best recommendation I received was for a product from Packet 8. Their system amounts to an off-site virtual PBX. You purchase the VOIP phones that connect directly to your Ethernet network from them.

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THE COACH'S CORNER

Debra Bruce, J.D.

Send Holiday Greetings That Really Connect

The holidays and year end present many opportunities for enhancing existing client relationships and developing new prospects. Many attorneys don't take full advantage of the opportunities, however, because they fail to invest a little forethought. Here are some ideas to consider if you engage in the venerable tradition of sending out holiday greetings.



When to Send Out Greetings

Although the number of holiday cards sent out has declined over the last decade, it is still difficult to stand out in the flurry of holiday communication. Some lawyers have migrated to sending Thanksgiving cards. What an excellent opportunity to express gratitude for your clients' trust and confidence in you, as demonstrated by their business. Alternatively, you might choose to adopt the French tradition of sending New Year's cards. Either way, at least your card won't be buried in a stack of other cards. If you want to showcase your firm's experience in representing clients who do business in China, perhaps you should consider sending out Chinese New Year cards.

Personalize Your Greetings

I urge my clients to find a way to include a personal message in each card, especially if the card is signed with the law firm name. Without a personal touch, the card does not have optimal impact. You risk disappointing the client who had a strong relationship with you, when you obviously treat them like one of the masses. Clients suspect that a staff member prepared the cards from a mailing list, without actual lawyer involvement. Even individually signed cards can conjure up an image of an assembly line signing process.

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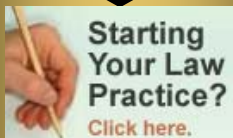
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The system uses whatever Internet access provider you have chosen for your office. Unless you dedicate an Internet connection specifically for your phone system your VOIP will share bandwidth with every other Internet user in your office. After a modest initial installation charge the Packet 8 system costs around \$40 per phone. The service includes voicemail, and a host of call management features. One great feature common to most VOIP systems is that a phone can be plugged into the Internet in Austin, Texas or Sydney, Australia and be connected to the same office system. The phone in a location remote from the main office can have a phone number from the same series of numbers as the main office and can be configured as an extension of the main system. The drawback of the Packet 8 system is that the sound quality and reliability is a function of your ISP and the amount of bandwidth available.

Recently, I had a conversation with Amy Hess, a lawyer with an office practice in East Texas, about some of the technology she uses in her office. Amy's practice involves transaction work for clients located overseas and in several major cities in the United States rather than in the area where her physical office is. Her phone system and long distance service is very important to her and she doesn't want to spend a bundle every month on a receptionist. She told me about a product called AccessLine that she uses and has had good results. I checked it out at www.accessline.com.

AccessLine offers the features common to other VOIP setups: voicemail, low cost long distance, no geographical limits for extensions, etc. There are two aspects of the product that distinguish it from Packet 8.

First, AccessLine works over a dedicated Internet connection maintained by AccessLine. Nothing else uses the bandwidth and the speed of the connection is tailored to the size of the phone system. Second, the system can be configured to provide phone service to an existing hard wired PBX system. This means that, for instance, if I want to go with VOIP to reduce my monthly costs because of the lower monthly service charge and long distance rates, I can get rid of my existing phone lines and plug in "lines" from the VOIP interface in their place. I could continue to use the phone system I paid

dearly for and wouldn't have to rewire my office for a new system.

The monthly cost of AccessLine depends on how many lines are needed, which basically means how many simultaneous calls the system must be capable of handling since the digital packets travel to the Internet system over one line. A hardware device is provided to split the access to the Internet into individual analogue lines to interface with a traditional PBX. Four lines cost \$150 per month which includes 2000 minutes of free long distance. There is a \$400 one time installation fee. The medium package offers capabilities from 5 to 24 lines. Five lines are \$184 per month with each additional line costing \$34.

A full list of the features appears on the web site linked above. The web site says that your AccessLine numbers can be listed in the white pages of the local phone book. I was curious to find out if the number could be listed in the Yellow Pages. I contacted AccessLine customer service and found out that listings in the Yellow Pages can be had for a price. I suppose I should have known that.

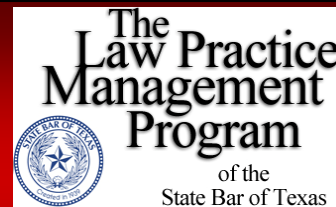
The bottom line is that AccessLine appears to be a good alternative to Packet 8 if you want dedicated bandwidth for your phone system, especially if you already have an analogue PBX that you want to continue to use.

I want to take a moment to wish all my readers Happy Holidays and to thank you for the great feedback you've given me on this column. I've received a lot of emails and several calls from you with questions and comments. I try to return them all as my practice permits. I really enjoy hearing about how you've put technology to work in your offices. It gives me ideas for my practice as well as for my office.

E. G. "Gerry" Morris is a solo practitioner and has practiced law for over 28 years in Austin, Texas. He is certified as a Criminal Law Specialist by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. His firm web site is at www.egmlaw.com. Email your comments and questions to Gerry at tech@egmlaw.com.



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Personalizing a Mass Mailing

If you have extensive contacts, how can you personalize all those cards? You really may not be able to invest the time and imagination required to add a meaningful note to each card. You can still support the bond with your contacts by inserting an enclosure with something personal about yourself, even though it is mass produced. When you give your clients, prospects and referral sources a personal glimpse of you, they feel like they know you, and it fosters loyalty. Oprah Winfrey is a master of revealing just enough about herself to give millions of strangers the feeling that they are in relationship with her, and her impact is legendary.

Here are a few examples of how to add a personal touch to your holiday greetings:

1. Write up a paragraph or two that describes something about your family. You might describe a holiday tradition in your home and tell a funny or touching anecdote about your kids now, or your childhood in relation to that tradition. Alternatively, the anecdotes can be about people or activities in your office or practice group. Tie it to wishes for the recipient like "may your holidays be filled with laughter and memories in the making."
2. Enclose a copy of a favorite poem or the lyrics to a favorite song related to the season, and tell why it's meaningful to you.
3. Describe one of the highlights of your year and share something from it. For example, you might have traveled to Italy, and you can enclose a recipe for a delicious marinara sauce translated from an Italian cookbook you purchased there, as a little gift.
4. Enclose a picture of you and your staff or your family, especially in holiday attire or doing something related to the holiday. You might have a photo of you and staff or family wrapping presents for an adopted family, carting donations to a food bank, decorating the office, or sledding in the snow. Of course, you'll include a brief explanation of what you were doing, and tie it to your wishes for the recipient. You could say something like "may the season fill your heart with the joy of giving and receiving," or "may the holidays awaken the kid in you again!"
5. Write a holiday newsletter. Yes, some people complain or make fun about those, but they are usually referring to the letters that sound like brag sheets. Instead of reciting honors and accolades, tell stories and anecdotes that give your reader the flavor of your year or important events that transpired. Don't be afraid to include personal disappoint-

ment about the outcome.

External Resources

If you like the idea of sending out more personalized greetings, but need help with simplifying such an overwhelming project, check out some of the services available at www.SendOutCards.com, and www.LongTermClients.com. They have some nice cards to choose from, and many suggestions about personalizing content. You upload the mailing list, and they'll send the cards out for you. Or they'll send you the fully addressed and stamped cards just waiting for you to sign them and put them in the mail.

Email Greetings

Finally, you may be wondering about whether it's ok to send

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Law Practice Management Tip

Management Tips are provided by the State Bar of Texas and ABA Practice Management Advisors. The tips are not meant as legal advice, nor binding on the State Bar of Texas or the ABA.

Flash or thumb drives, have become the choice method for transferring electronic files from computer to computer because of their small size, which makes them easy to transport. Attorneys have embraced this technology and don't think twice about saving sensitive client information on these small drives. The relative small size, however, makes it extremely easy to misplace and / or lose these drives, which could become a nightmare if it does indeed contain confidential client information.

To ensure that you do secure the information on your thumb drive, employ at least one or all of the following tips:

1. Guard and protect your portable drive with your life. Attach the drive to your office or car key chain so that you always know where it is.
2. Use encryption or authentication to protect your device. A simple password may do the trick for you in most cases but consider multiple passwords - one to access the drive and a separate password for each file or folder. For even tighter security, consider encryption or authentication software, which some flash drive manufacturers now include with the drive itself.

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out email greetings instead of cards. I would say "That depends." How traditional is your audience? You might just come across as cheap. If you have the tradition of sending a newsletter, I think email works well for that. Just be aware that your communication risks getting lost in an even bigger flurry of unread email.

With regard to those online greeting cards: they may not be opened or received. Many IT departments block executable files from delivery to protect against viruses. Many individuals don't click on the link to electronic cards to avoid cookies and other spyware.

Some people receive hundreds of legitimate emails per day, and get annoyed at anything that further clogs their mailbox. Others tend to be more responsive to email, and might actually engage in a conversation with you as a result. Know your audience.

My Holiday Greeting to You

Please consider these ideas as a little holiday gift from me in appreciation for being a reader who makes this column successful. I would love for you to share your holiday greetings with me. May these ideas cause you to relive some happy memories and come a little closer to your friends and clients during the holidays.

Debra Bruce (www.lawyer-coach.com) practice law for 18 years, before becoming a professionally trained Executive Coach for lawyers. She is Vice Chair of the Law Practice Management Committee of the State Bar of Texas, and board member and past leader of Houston Coaches Network, the Houston Chapter of the International Coach Federation. She welcomes your questions and comments at debra@lawyer-coach.com.

Upcoming Events

The Challenge of Managing Your Employment Law Practice, is scheduled in Houston January 30, 2008. For more information or to register, call 800-204-2222, ext. 1574 or visit: <http://www.texasbarcle.com/CLE/AABuy1.aspx?ProductType=EV&IID=7639>

Law Practice Management Webcast

The Dissolution of a Law Practice is scheduled for January 23, 2008 from 12:30 to 1:30 pm. More details to come, visit: <http://www.TexasBarLPM.com/> and click on "Webcasts".

Law Practice Management Special Offers

Books of the Month

How to Build and Manage a Personal Injury Practice

Regular Price - \$64.95

Sale Price - \$30.00

Written by a personal injury lawyer who has been practicing for over 20 years, the book has been written for lawyers interested in starting a personal injury law practice, as well as for lawyers currently practicing P.I. who are interested in strengthening their practices. This book discusses the basic differences between personal injury law and other types of law practice and provides guidance for avoiding common pitfalls.

How to Draft Bills Clients Rush to Pay

Regular Price - \$67.95

Sale Price - \$47.55

Nothing has a more dramatic and immediate impact on successful client relations and your bottom line as your approach to drafting bills. Motivated clients will pay their bills with a higher degree of reliability. Satisfied clients will help you to grow your practice. A quick read of this book will give you a lifetime of increased profits, better cash flow, and improved client satisfaction. Over the years, generations of lawyers have looked to Harris Morgan and Jay Foonberg for their advice and counsel; now you, too, can benefit from their wisdom-if you rush to buy this important book today!

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