

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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LEGAL INDUSTRY/BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

## Understanding the Law Firm App Landscape

Find out why firms are producing apps, what the process involves and how to maintain mobile offerings.

For several years, law firms have been steadily releasing original apps. By 2012, firms on the AmLaw 200 and Global 100 lists together had produced 26, according to [\*data\*](#) from the Law Firm Mobile blog.



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In the past seven years, though, firms' app production appear picked up considerable speed. In 2017, by Fliplet's [\*count\*](#), a total of 100 were available in app stores from the 100 highest-revenue-producing U.S. and U.K. law firms. Nearly half of those apps (43%) had been released in 2016 or 2017 alone.

### MOBILE TECH OBJECTIVES

Law firms offer proprietary apps for various reasons, ranging from providing basic information to delivering staff services.

A number are meant to help market the firm. Early adopters of client advisory apps — which they'd otherwise mail or email into an app format. However, client-oriented apps — which comprised only about 10% of law firm app offerings in 2017 — are a more prominent user category today, according to Nicole Bradick, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the legal technology product development firm The Principle.

"A lot are client advisory apps, where you answer a few questions [a firm will] let you know what the regulation in Singapore or something is," Bradick says. "There are also apps that will [send you an] alert if you have a compliance issue to contact your law firm."

Then there are crisis response apps, sometimes referred to as "raid" apps, that supply guidance for handling an emergency legal event. Darrell Raby, Manager of Application Development at attorney firm Sheppard Mullin, says he's seen increased interest in these lately.

"[The app] gives potential clients a primer on the law for security breaches and what they're facing if it happens to them," Raby says. "That avenue is a way to bring in clients, because the information provide in the app is limited; it shows the firm has some expertise to represent you and says, 'contact us.'"

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More firms are also now crafting employee-experience-enhancement apps, according to Raby. Sheppard Mullin created one to facilitate remote use of its business intake system, which allows firm members to indicate no conflict of interest or credit issues exist with a particular new client or case.

“Attorneys said, ‘I’d like to be able to simply approve this case on my phone and not have to go remote into the network and log up the system if I’m not in the office,’” Raby says. “The content is technically on the network, but you’re able to [access] it on a

mobile device.” Event apps, which Fliplet reported were the most utilized type, also remain a popular option due to the convenience and interactivity they can provide.

Global law firm Locke Lord had traditionally distributed information at its annual partner retreat in a binder. But it decided earlier this year to offer an app that would also allow the more than 300 attendees to message one another and upload photos.

“We have 20 offices; one of the points was we want people to know each other,” says Julie Gilbert, the firm’s Chief Marketing Officer. “When we had dinners, you could rotate pictures on the wall so people could see them; that was a lot of fun.”

The firm was surprised to find out the app had received an average of 46 page views per user and an open rate of 93% — which was significantly higher than the 65% to 70% the company that created the app usually sees, according to Gilbert.

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### **APP ASSEMBLY**

Although an app can help position a law firm as a tech-forward business, if it doesn’t serve any real purpose, creating it will just be a money, time and personnel investment, according to Stephen DiGennaro, Director of Marketing Technology for Eversheds Sutherland, a law firm with more than 3,000 attorneys.

“It’s something to do not because it’s trendy but because it’s useful,” DiGennaro says. “A lot of companies and law firms turn an entire website into a mobile app. With Wi-Fi being so available and fast these days, folks can access websites just fine. Nobody really wants [unnecessary] app taking up a lot of room on their phone.”

Development costs may be less of a concern for firms with significant in-house tech resources. Some instead opt to outsource a portion of their development work to save time — a method that may be a more viable option for smaller firms without a dedicated design staff.

Eversheds Sutherland created its BreachLawWATCH app — of information about data breach laws in the United States and jurisdictions — internally before launching it roughly 10 months ago. The firm has also worked with an external design company or app developer, including SALT Shaker, a state and local tax commentary resource, and Texas openCourts, which provides an overview of civil courts and judges.

The firm generally sets aside 12 months for design, a process that begins with an eight-hour discovery meeting where digital team members and other key players brainstorm in a room outfitted with a cappuccino bar, candy, energy drinks and other amenities “to keep people as creative as possible,” according to DiGennaro.

“When we walk away from the meeting, the team is able to put together a functional spec,” DiGennaro says. “The 40-page document [is] a blueprint for how it will happen.”

Determining who’ll be in charge of supplying content, both initially and on an ongoing basis, is also key. Early in the planning process, Eversheds Sutherland designates a partner to oversee the project and identifies who will be responsible for physically writing content.

In some instances, such as with the BreachLawWATCH app, users can have access to add content directly.

“Apps can be an encyclopedia of information that’s updated by users. We’re looking for content daily,” DiGennaro says. “You need to establish from the beginning that this is a regular schedule.”

Once an app prototype has been developed, some firms are hesitant to involve end-users in the review process. However, Bradick advises sharing initial versions to help validate any assumptions and avoid building unnecessary features.

"[Firms] are always really scared to show [clients] something that's completely perfect," she says. "It's going to be much more successful and the client is going to be more excited about using it. Clients are very willing to spend time doing that."

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### OTHER APP DETAILS

In addition to app construction, firms also need to consider what technological updates will need to be made. Compatibility issues arise, for example, after Apple releases an operating system (OS) update.

"Say you're an iOS 6 user. Now there's a good chance our app is not going to work for you anymore," Raby says. "We don't have much control over that; we just try to keep up. If an attorney's phone is not updated past iOS 6, it's time to get a new phone."

As with many initiatives, planning is crucial to ensure developers can be available to make updates as they become necessary.

In addition to periodically handling iOS and Android upgrades, Eversheds Sutherland schedules time throughout the year to check pre-existing apps with functionality and features the firm has determined it wants to incorporate.

“We choose from a list of enhancements we’ve put together in 12 months,” DiGennaro says. “And in the budget for the following year, we space things out so we can put resources and personnel around them.”

Firms can prepare to handle more off-the-cuff changes by proactively instituting a clear, well-defined series of steps that address how developers will react.

“Oftentimes, people don’t fully think the maintenance aspect through,” Bradick says. “Bugs will happen; new versions of the software come up. Having a process in place for doing quality assurance and sending out fixes is all part of good operation.” ■

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Erin Brereton** is a freelance writer, editor and content strategist who has written about the legal industry, business, technology and other topics for 20 years.

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