

Inc./Cisco—Growing with Technology Awards Finalist



JOSE E. LATOUR AND ASSOCIATES' AMIABLE APPROACH TO LEGAL SERVICES THROWS THE IMAGE OF THE STODGY, SUITED ATTORNEY AND HIS ENORMOUS OAK DESK OUT THE WINDOW. THE FIRM'S STRESS-FREE, INTIMIDATION-FREE, ALMOST-JARGON-FREE STYLE OF LEGAL SERVICES IS ENOUGH TO TURN ANY SKEPTIC INTO A LEGAL ENTHUSIAST. AND SINCE GOING ON LINE TWO YEARS AGO WITH USVISANEWS.COM, ITS REPUTATION FOR BEING HIGHLY RESPONSIVE AND EFFICIENT SEEMS TO PREVAIL OVER ITS FRIENDLY, APPROACHABLE METHODS.

Background

Founded in 1990, the Jose E. Latour and Associates law firm represents a wide range of clients, from two-employee companies to Fortune 500 companies with up to 90,000 employees and hundreds of offices. The firm specializes in providing online immigration legal services to foreign investors, immigrants, and U.S. companies employing foreign professionals.

The firm efficiently communicates with thousands of clients a year through its Web site, e-mail, and weekly online newsletters, and it maintains an extremely high level of customer satisfaction. Latour's use of networking technology has led to its development of human resource employee prescreening services, private compliance audits, and numerous other "virtual" services for the IT industry.

Last year, the firm was the first to participate in COMDEX in Miami and is now planning its aggressive expansion in the IT sector. The firm has clients in 48 states, with less than 10 percent of its business originating from Florida, where it is headquartered.

Challenges

Back in 1997, most of the company's clientele fit into the health-care/rehabilitation sector. But Medicare reform and a severe drop in business prompted Latour to shift the firm's focus to a more in-demand and rapidly growing sector—immigration law within the IT sector.

With high-tech companies sprouting up across the nation,

Latour observed an increasing demand for software professionals in the IT industry and a U.S. labor pool unable to satisfy that demand. Many companies began recruiting programmers and other specialized employees from abroad. Several foreign entrepreneurs also moved to the U.S., starting partnerships and joint ventures in high-tech. The movement inspired some knowledgeable attorneys—who could help ease the paperwork, legal procedures, and investment hassles—to go on line.

Latour followed the trend, installing a Windows file server and networking several workstations, which immediately improved interoffice communications. He signed up with an ISP across the country in California and launched a Web site (<http://www.usvisanews.com>) specifically targeting immigration services within the IT industry. The firm soon shifted its clientele focus to high-tech companies, who are typically more "tech friendly" and comfortable using attorney services on line, Latour says.

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Jose E. Latour

President

Jose E. Latour and Associates

Since going on line, the firm has reduced its number of health care clients, now focusing on the IT industry, national interest waivers, and professional and investment-based immigration. The site now provides everything from Visa application information to the most current news on immigration issues.

While many law firms conduct business over the Internet, most areas of practice can realize limited benefits, Latour says. But for a firm that represents employers from all over the U.S. who must employ foreign talent as well as industry leaders from abroad, online communications is ideal, he says.

“Our business operations have been so streamlined in the past year, that we have literally eliminated other areas of practice within our already very narrow niche,” he says. “We are always one federal law away from losing the basis of our business. So, our team of attorneys and paralegals has realized that our job stability grows as our Web presence is diversified into new clients and markets.”

Solution

Latour’s network brings new meaning to the word “basic.” The company’s 10 PCs each have an Ethernet card and are connected through 10BaseT cable to a central hub. Latour leases its server from an ISP, which provides the company’s firewall security. Employees access the pier-to-pier network from their desktop PCs, which means each employee can help out on any case if needed. “We all have access to everyone’s hard drive,” said Latour’s networking manager Tim Carroll.

The e-mail server uses a 33.6K baud modem and e-mail software to handle its internal and external e-mail traffic. The system also has no monitoring system. “When things go down, we reboot,” Carroll said. “It’s nothing fancy, but it’s functional.”

The company installed an instant credit verification program to allow immediate payment validation for its transactions. While the business still processes some orders “with humans,” Carroll says, the credit verification program is fast and easy, and requires fewer personnel.

Most recently, the company worked with Cisco Powered Network partner Qwest Communications to install a T1 connection and Cisco 1600 series router at the Florida office. The in-house Web server will help the company accommodate its enormous traffic volume.

Results

Just one year after launching its site, Latour conducted about 50 percent of its company sales through the Internet. Today, the company’s Internet business has jumped to 80 percent. It also conducts most of its communications electronically. The Internet

has played an enormous role in increasing sales for the firm, which adds from three to five new clients each week. In 1998, it conducted an additional \$200,000 in new business as a direct result of its Web presence. Last year, that number doubled.

Latour’s eight-person staff answers all e-mail (typically 300 or more per day) and phone calls on the same day they are received. Thanks to e-mail communication, the firm’s clients revel in the unprecedented level of attention and detail they receive. E-mail communications form a chronological file for each client archive, which has dramatically improved customer service and satisfaction.

The firm’s attorneys also thrive in the new online environment, Latour says. “Find good lawyers and ask if they would like to make a competitive salary in beautiful North Florida, work forty to forty-five hours a week and no weekends. And they never, never have to wear a tie or suit again,” Latour says. “Every attorney friend of mine would kill for this type of setup, and in immigration law, it is possible. Though, no one believed we could do it.”

For Latour, the Internet has proved itself as a money-saving, efficiency-boosting business tool that dramatically reduced the firm’s communications and marketing costs. Staff members can now research legal issues on line, without ever stepping into a law library. And the firm now secures faster payment because paying on line is so easy for clients. Latour, however, maintains that the greatest benefit has been the increase in customer satisfaction.

“Our role models for our business are not big, impressive law firms,” Latour says. “They are Amazon.com, Gateway, Sweetwater Sound—companies that understand what customer service is all about. We were always very warm and fuzzy. But by using the Internet, we’ve been able to create an environment where people aren’t intimidated to come to us. And, it’s working.”

“Thanks to the Internet, clients are starting to understand that it’s not the marble floors and penthouse views that get legal results, it’s the specialization and an unwavering commitment to customer service.”

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