



# Will the US online legal model work in the UK?

A legal offering combining face-to-face advice with online forms could help firms respond to the Tesco law threat but lawyers will need to think more strategically about their brand, says **Stuart Bushell**

So Quality Solicitors are linking-up with Legal Zoom to promote their member firms over the internet. On the face of it, a coup for QS to match the coup - or was it? - of installing sales units in branches or WHSmith. If the online legal document revolution takes off in the way that some commentators think it will, then this could prove to be a very shrewd move.

The online option clearly has merit. This has become the standard way of buying insurances and holidays, so why not legal services, where the market is well developed in the US?

But let us pause for a moment. We read that 90 per cent of the lawyer market in the US is represented by sole practitioners, who rely on LegalZoom and Rocket Lawyer in the same way as small local traders rely on Yellow Pages. Are QualitySolicitors' firms really in a comparable position? There were rumblings within some QS firms that the WH Smith deal might have the effect of dragging them down market, and there could be concerns that the LegalZoom deal might have a similar result.

## Mix value

Equally, however, there is an argument that the availability of online services as part of a firm's business mix will enable it to retain those clients who might otherwise be tempted away by the Co-op and their ilk. It has long been anticipated that in the post-Legal Services Act world those legal services which can be commoditised will be commoditised, and solicitors will be put on their mettle to demonstrate added value when providing advice which places demands on their technical skills.

Being able to provide both online services and personal advisory services could provide a means of enabling solicitors to segment their client base for marketing and practice development

purposes. In this context, it is not only the thrifty who need IT solutions, it is also the young. However, the greatest business development potential lies with the baby-boom generation, the pre- and at-retirement market, whose better-heeled constituents are more likely to need traditional private client services, from trusted advisers.

Also, Epoq have demonstrated that online document systems can have a

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valuable internal application. A more sophisticated version of their system provides a much wider range of documentation than the standard wills and powers of attorney documents that might be bought online, and each offers optional alternative wordings with drop-downs and links for guidance and reference, creating a means of enabling trainee lawyers to cut their teeth and for their supervisors to monitor their activity.

## Client data

Epoq have also started to turn to advantage the data which consumer users of their system enter on the standard documentation. The personal details clearly belong to the law firms which use the system, but has hitherto sat neglected on the Cloud. Epoq have now developed a means of making that data available to their user firms in a form which could assist them to develop much more detailed client databases than most firms possess at present.

Solicitors' lack of properly structured client data is a major Achilles heel for solicitors when their business models are compared with the new entrants to the legal services market. Professor Richard

Susskind commented recently that if solicitors' practices were to survive and flourish in the post-Legal services Act world, small firms would have to come to terms with technology and medium-sized firms would have to consolidate and merge.

It was striking that when QualitySolicitors launched, it identified Tesco law as the threat against which it would offer to provide protection.

Recently, the QS announcement regarding the LegalZoom link-up seemed to take aim at Co-op Legal Services. Some observers took the view that an assortment of law firms with only a name in common would not be in a position to compete against the sophisticated IT-led business models of the "pile-it-high-and-sell-it-cheap" brigade and that the real threat lay elsewhere. The Co-op can argue, with some conviction, that it has avoided commoditisation as too strong an element in its offering, for instance by its move into family law. It could equally be argued that online legal services cater for a similar catchment. However, if handled adroitly such services could complement firms' advisory services and would in addition assist in inducting firms into the IT mentality.

The challenge QS will have to face is brand image. How would its member firms wish to be perceived? By reference to the Meerkat market, or the Quality market? And could the two be made to appear compatible?

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