Turning Prospects into Clients

A FindLaw White Paper

FindLaw

Executive Summary

1. Law firms work hard to gain visibility and connect with qualified new-business leads. So it's vital to have a well thought-out plan for converting those prospects into clients.

2. How a law firm responds in the hours and days after receiving an inquiry is critical to converting the lead.

3. Your initial telephone, e-mail and in-person interactions with the prospect are an opportunity to set your firm apart from competitors and to collect key information about the quality of the lead.

4. It's important to track leads and regularly review your lead conversion procedures.

5. Matching services and Web analytic programs are powerful Internet-based tools that a law firm can use to raise its lead conversion rates.

Introduction

Largely due to the Internet, a law firm now has many more opportunities to promote its services to prospective clients. A well-designed and well-written Web site, listings in legal directories and other forms of online advertising are just a few of the ways a firm can generate more visibility with its target market.

But visibility is only a means to an end. Generating more hits to your Web site is an important first step towards growing your bottom line. It's what you do with those leads, however, that's the true measure of success.

This white paper is about that next step. It describes tools and strategies that will help you manage lead follow-up and lead qualification effectively, and ultimately convert more prospects into clients of your law firm. Among the topics covered are:

- Making It Easy: Web site design and other strategies for managing new leads
- Moving Fast: The importance of rapid lead follow-up
- Responding Effectively: Making the most of your initial contacts with the prospect
- Measuring Lead Quality: Techniques for identifying qualified leads, including matching services
- Handling Missed Leads: How to learn (and profit) from the ones who get away
- Reviewing Your Procedures: Web analytics and other tools for improving lead conversion

Making It Easy: Web site design and other strategies for managing new leads

If traffic to your Web site is rising month by month, that's a good sign you're doing something right. But remember that Web traffic alone is just statistics — converting those clicks into high-quality clients is what really counts.

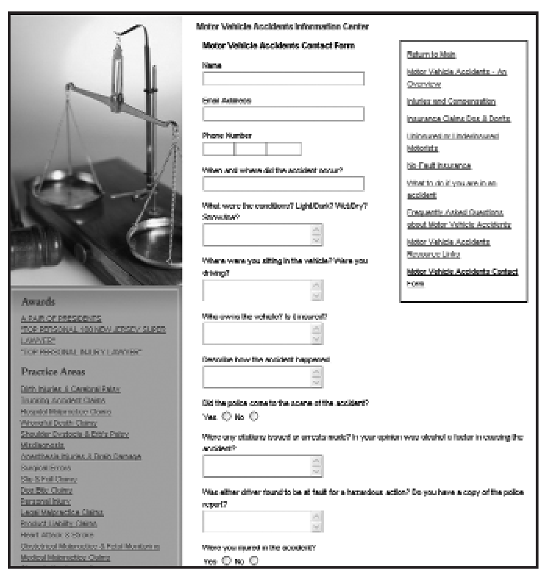
Step number one in raising your lead conversion rate is ensuring that your Web site and other marketing materials are optimized to encourage prospects to move forward and contact you — and that you provide a quality, professional response when they do.

Start by looking at your Web site from an overall, high-level perspective. Is it easy to scan and navigate, or is a visitor confronted with long, intimidating paragraphs and a complicated design? Check to make sure you have a prominent Home button, a site map for users who get lost, plus plenty of white space, subheads and bullets to make your content more welcoming. Since you have about 8–12 seconds to convince the typical Web user to stay on your site, good first impressions are critical.

Next, zero in on some specifics. Ensure that your site has:

- **A clear call to action.** Nothing increases conversion better than strategically-placed calls to action. Make sure that your phone number and e-mail address (and a directive like "Contact us today for a free consultation") appear — in bold — in an eye-catching place on each Web page.

- **A client intake form.** Provide a form that prospects can link to, complete with details of their legal need, then submit to you. Think through the right questions to ask — you want to capture key data without making the form cumbersome. Need ideas? Go online and look through the contact forms on other law firm Web sites.



- **Multiple contact options.** Some people like talking on the phone. Others prefer operating online. Give visitors to your site lots of different ways to contact you.

The idea is to make your Web site really work like a "web" — to catch more business by making it impossible for prospects to miss your strong call to action and convenient contact options. The same applies to your advertisements, brochures and other marketing materials as well. A potential client should never have to look hard for ways to reach you.

"Effective Web site organization and content, combined with responsive follow-up, will help you convert on your opportunity to turn prospects into qualified clients."

Once a prospect does decide to take that next step, don't waste the opportunity. If you're not responding to calls and e-mails yourself, ensure that your receptionist or assistant is trained in handling inquiries, answering frequently asked questions and scheduling appointments. Some larger firms have a client intake specialist on staff to manage this process. Does a member of your firm speak Spanish? Consider making that person available to answer calls and e-mails, and set up appointments, if there are a large number of Spanish speakers in your part of the U.S. who form an attractive target market for you.

You're ultimately selling yourself, and that starts from the minute a prospect contacts you. In today's 24-hour, Web-driven world, it's easy for consumers to proceed to Option B if they don't get the rapid, high-quality response that they're looking for.

The Bottom Line on Making It Easy: *Leads can come in anytime, from anywhere, but can be lost just as quickly. Effective Web site organization and content, combined with responsive follow-up, will help you convert on your opportunity to turn prospects into qualified clients.*

Moving Fast: The importance of rapid lead follow-up

2 a.m. After a long evening of considering options, a prospect goes online and Googles law firms in his city that specialize in bankruptcy law. He e-mails a few firms that catch his attention.

7 a.m. The inquiry is on your Blackberry when you check it first thing in the morning. An hour later, you're on the phone with the prospect introducing yourself.

11 a.m. The prospect is in your office talking shop and preparing to sign a fee agreement.

In today's legal marketplace, speed is a key factor in lead conversion. Often it's the attorney who responds first who wins. And in a world of 2 a.m. Google searches and instantly available information, your response time ideally should be measured in hours, not days.

That's partly due to the psychology of the typical online prospect. They're Web-savvy and used to instant information and lots of choices — but unsure about how to hire an attorney, and likely stressed and anxious as well. They want a solution to their problem *now*, and the first authoritative voice that offers it has a great chance to convert that prospect.

As often as your schedule permits, invest time every day in cultivating and responding to new business leads:

- Follow up the same day, if possible, on incoming e-mails, inquiries left on your voicemail and phone calls taken by your staff. A return call from you or another attorney typically is the most effective response. If there's no answer, leave a message indicating your availability and a direct phone number or e-mail address.
- Mail a brochure and other information about your firm to the prospect the same day that you receive an inquiry.
- Consider hiring a telephone intake service to pick up after-hours calls if your budget permits. Are you the type that likes to stay connected 24 hours a day? Have inquiries from your Web site or any matching services you subscribe to forwarded to your handheld device or personal e-mail account.

- Be persistent. If you don't hear back from a prospect, follow up a few times before you write off the opportunity. Everyone misses calls and e-mails — when you're on vacation or on the road for meetings, for example. Continue trying to contact the prospect even if you suspect the trail's gone cold.

The goal: to bring the prospect into your office for a free consultation. Try to schedule it for the next few days following your initial conversation. After that, your chances of converting that prospect drop off dramatically.

The Bottom Line on Moving Fast: *Quick follow-up is key to converting leads efficiently, particularly online-generated leads.*

Responding Effectively: Making the most of your initial contacts with the prospect

Once the prospect has taken the first step and contacted you, you've got a (brief) window of opportunity — starting with the initial e-mail exchange or phone call, and then in meeting with the prospect in your office — to set yourself apart with a high-quality response. Think about the worries and questions that most prospects have at this point of the process, and how you can address them. Here are some key issues to consider:

What's the right tone to take in speaking with a prospect?
Remember that while you deal with legal issues daily, prospects more than likely are anxious and intimidated by the situation they're in. A little empathy can go a long way toward establishing a relationship, even if you've heard the same stories and facts a dozen or more times before. Think compassion first, then documentation of their case.

Try to be direct and authoritative without coming off as pushy. Ask the client how they're doing and listen to the response. And address their uncertainty about the case. Stress, for example, your experience in working with the other players involved — the other attorneys, insurance adjustors, etc. Use objective language ("If I was your attorney...") to explain the legal situation they're in and how it's likely to develop.

How much information should I provide in the initial call and consultation? You want to gain the trust and confidence of your prospect. You're not, on the other hand, a free source of legal aid for whoever asks. So where do you draw the line? A good rule of thumb is to go slightly beyond the standard FAQ information that you provide on your Web site — far enough to establish your expertise and demonstrate your interest in the case without forming an attorney-client relationship or having your time wasted. The more prospects you talk with, the easier it becomes to strike the right balance.

How much time should I spend on office consultations, and should I charge for it? For the right prospect you'll obviously do whatever it takes — but a free, thirty-minute consultation is pretty standard for evaluating a new business opportunity. Particularly for the consumer client, cost is always an issue. The key is to move the conversation from cost to value. By giving prospects a fast reply to their inquiry, good information over the phone and then a free consultation, you should be well positioned to do so.

What can I do to make office consultations more successful? One key is to minimize any procedural difficulties that can reduce your conversion rate. Make sure, for example, that the prospect clearly understands what forms and other information they need to bring to your office. If you have paperwork the prospect will need to complete, mail out a packet in advance of your appointment. Consider making those forms available on your Web site as downloadable PDFs that the prospect can print and complete.

Another good idea is to call the prospect to confirm appointments. It sounds obvious, but many law firms say that this simple step dramatically reduces their no-show rate. If you're in a big city, make sure the prospect has clear driving directions to your office and a phone number to call if they can't locate you.

Finally, stay on schedule. Whether it's the doctor's office or your lobby, waiting is the #1 pet peeve of most consumers. Strive to get your meeting started on time. If there is a delay, offer a beverage and access to a phone or wireless Internet so your prospects can use their time productively.

The Bottom Line on Responding Effectively: *As an attorney, you're ultimately selling yourself and the expertise of your firm. Focus on providing superior client service from your very first interactions with the prospect.*

Measuring Lead Quality: Techniques for identifying qualified leads, including matching services

Is the prospect a good fit for representation by your firm? The language on your Web site needs to focus on the type of prospect you would like to attract. Qualifying questions on your intake form or a comments area that allows prospects to describe their situations will bring forward those potential clients you would like to contact. Starting with the follow-up, your initial e-mail, telephone and in-person interactions are a chance to not only sell yourself to prospects but also to collect additional key information about them — the specifics of the case but also their goals, expectations and temperament.

Take a close look, for example, at the initial e-mail or intake form you receive and what it can tell you about:

- The prospect's level of education and experience with the legal system.
- Complaints they have about other attorneys they've worked with.
- Their ability to pay for your services.
- The type of client they're likely to be — hands-off, a micro-manager, etc.

To make this due diligence effective, it's important to be clear on your own practice goals and where this prospect does or does not fit in. Are you looking for quantity or a smaller number of high-quality, high-revenue clients? How narrowly do you want to focus on a few key practice areas? Once those priorities are set, you can evaluate the prospect and make your call — pursue the lead, decline it, refer it to a colleague or collect more information if necessary.

The origin of the lead — how the prospect came to you — is another factor in the qualification process. The leads you generate through mass advertising, for example, may not be as strong on average as those that come via the client intake form on your Web site. With high-volume, lower-average-quality lead sources, identifying the well-qualified prospects will require more rigorous vetting on your part.

Matching services. Evaluating lead quality can be an inexact, time-consuming process. Legal matching services are an option to consider if you want to both pursue more leads online and improve your lead qualification efforts.

Matching services share the same basic idea with Web sites for job hunters and online dating — they use the information-sharing power of the Internet to connect individuals with a need to providers who can meet it. For attorneys, these services match law firms like yours with motivated prospects in your geographic location and practice areas.

Typically, prospects arrive at a matching service like LegalConnection.com from other law-related sites, legal directories or search engines such as Google, Yahoo! and MSN. They complete an online form that solicits information about their legal need. Based on this client-provided criteria, the matching service searches its database of subscribing attorneys, identifies a small number of matches and delivers them to the prospect, typically in the form of short attorney or law firm profiles.

As an attorney "match," you receive an e-mail notification if the prospect selects you from their results list. Based on the information collected from the prospect you decide how to proceed — you can accept the case and exchange contact details with the prospect, or decline if it's not a good fit for your firm.

The result is a bi-directional matching process that allows both parties to make informed decisions about whether or not to move forward. From the attorney's perspective, you see prequalified leads only. For prospects, the process is attractive because it's confidential, connects them to firms actively looking for clients, and offers better information than they could get from a random Web search or by looking through the Yellow Pages. It's a step forward from one-directional matching services, with the difference being that leads are forwarded directly to the attorney. The service is not involved in communicating information (such as the attorney's acceptance of the matter and contact information) back to the prospect.

"One key to succeeding with matching services is fast, responsive client service."

One key to succeeding with matching services is fast, responsive client service. Your firm typically won't be the only one receiving the lead. While matching services can deliver more qualified leads, you still need to focus on other factors — rapid response, good closing skills, providing quality information on your firm profile — to convert prospects into signed clients.

Some of the benefits that matching services offer include:

- Efficient use of your time. Lead generation and lead qualification take time and effort. While not a substitute for normal due diligence, matching services can significantly streamline your client-development process — and free more time for billable work — by providing detailed case information before you speak to the prospect.
- Control over client selection. With more inquiries coming in, and better information on the front end about the prospect, you can be selective in picking and choosing when to follow up and which practice areas you focus on.

- Trackable return on investment. Inquiries arrive from a specific e-mail address with a specific questionnaire, so you can easily calculate the cost of acquiring clients via matching services.

The Bottom Line on Measuring Lead Quality: *Use your initial telephone, e-mail and in-person interactions with the prospect to begin measuring lead quality. Matching services can connect you with a larger number of pre-qualified leads.*

Handling Missed Leads: How to learn (and profit) from the ones who get away

Consider it the cost of doing business. Some prospects will skip appointments or fail to return your calls and e-mails. For others, your firm just won't be the right fit.

Take a deep breath and think long-term. Don't burn any bridges that a prospect may ultimately come back to you on. Instead, set yourself up for success in the future by:

- Providing your business card and other information about your firm to the prospect after your conversation is over (except those certifiable time-wasters that you know you don't want to work with).
- Following up a few times a year to maintain the relationship. Capture the prospect's birthday on your intake form, for example, and send a card. Ask the prospect if you can add them to your e-mail newsletter's subscriber list.
- Referring the prospect, when it's appropriate, to another law firm in your area, or to a physician, physical therapist or auto repair shop if the person needs help in one of those areas. You'll build a network of allies that will bring referrals back in your direction over time.

Let prospects know that you're available to answer their questions or to speak with them again if they change their minds. Using your expertise in the practice area, take them through the key pain points and red flags that they're likely to encounter as their case moves forward. When those developments do in fact occur, at least some of those prospects are likely to rethink their situation and pull your business card back out again.

The Bottom Line on Handling Missed Leads: *With the right attitude and some perseverance on your part, even missed leads can end up benefiting your firm.*

Reviewing Your Procedures: Web analytics and other tools for improving lead conversion

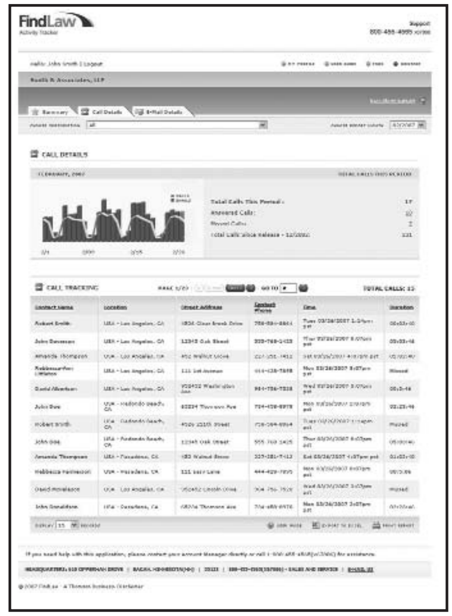
As we've discussed, improving lead conversion doesn't require complex, expensive changes to how you run your practice. It's a matter of good client service, some Web savvy plus an understanding of today's online legal consumer. Like anything else, the key is to keep getting better at it, and there are simple ways to do that.

Periodically recruit a colleague or friend, for example, to contact your firm posing as a new-business prospect. Get their feedback on the speed and quality of your firm's response: how easy or difficult your Web site was to use; how quickly their e-mail inquiry drew a response; and how effectively your receptionist responded to their needs and routed them to the right person.

Another good idea is to get on the Internet occasionally to check out the competition. Look at their Web sites through the eyes of a prospect. Are they easier to use than your site? Or can you learn from their mistakes?

By the same token, keep your ears open when prospects tell you about their experiences with other firms — jot down notes after the conversation if there are "dos" and "don'ts" you can use to improve your own practice. When you have extra time, conduct an informal survey of your new clients, plus some other prospects who you weren't able to convert. Find out what tipped the balance in your favor, or led them to go in a different direction.

Lead tracking. Depending on the size of your firm and its marketing budget, your lead tracking system may be a sophisticated software system, a simpler manila folder approach or somewhere in-between. Regardless, the key is to use it consistently and solicit the same information from prospects no matter how they reach your firm (via the Web, a print ad, speaking engagements, etc.). By doing so, you can determine which marketing channels are delivering the best leads with the highest profitability.

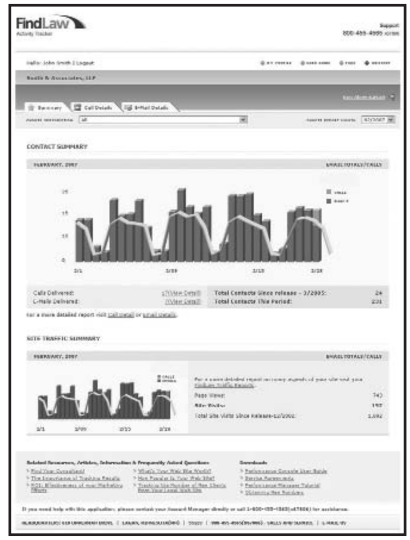


Besides collecting basic information about your prospects and their legal needs, ask questions like:

- How did you hear about our firm?
- Did you visit our Web site?
- If yes, did it influence you to contact us?

A prospect may initially get your name from a friend, but then check out your firm (and other referrals they received) by visiting Web sites for more comprehensive information. By tracking leads, you may also find that some channels deliver a large quantity of leads while others provide great quality (i.e., better qualified leads who fit your "ideal client" profile). All good information to have when you sit down to develop your next marketing budget.

Technology is another tool you can use to improve lead conversion. The Web analytic software available from site developers such as FindLaw, for example, is a good way to evaluate how prospects use your Web site, and identify changes you can make to turn more site clicks into clients.



"Technology is another tool you can use to improve lead conversion."

Web analytic programs vary from simple traffic reporting systems to more sophisticated programs that can help you assess:

- **The most popular areas on your site:** What attracts prospects to these pages on your site? Does your Contact Us information appear prominently in high-traffic areas?
- **"Exit pages" where prospects click away to other sites:** Are there improvements you can make to underperforming areas where you're losing valuable leads? How can you channel visitors more effectively to your client intake form?
- **Other useful information such as number of unique visitors and page views, and which keywords draw prospects to your site:** Can you fine-tune your content to attract more visitors and improve their experience once they arrive?

Hard data from Web analysis also enables you to set benchmarks that you can measure against. Say your firm is attracting clients in equal percentages for the various practice areas you are marketing, but you would like to grow particularly in one segment. The right technology can help you track your progress toward reaching that goal, and measure the impact of new pages and fresh content in pushing conversion upward.

The Web is now the first choice for consumers searching for legal assistance. Keeping your site updated, refreshed and in line with your marketing goals is one of the most important steps you can take to raise your conversion rate (and your bottom line).

The Bottom Line on Reviewing Your Procedures: *Regularly evaluate your lead conversion procedures to ensure you aren't missing opportunities. Web analytic programs can help you improve your site's conversion rate.*

Conclusion

In today's online world, there are many ways for a firm to promote its expertise to prospective clients and generate leads. Fortunately, there are tools and strategies to help you improve your lead conversion rate and bring more new clients to your firm.

FindLaw can help. From Web site creation to analytic software to our matching service LegalConnection.com, we offer a range of solutions to help you convert more prospects to clients.

We look forward to working with you to grow your firm's client base!

Learn More

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