



Visibility, Design and Content – Three Steps to Successful Online Marketing

A FindLaw White Paper

Executive Summary

“Effective site design enables a law firm to communicate its unique identity and appeal to its target audience.”

1. Increasingly, consumers turn to the Internet for legal information and to select counsel. Law firms with an effective Web presence have a tremendous opportunity to generate new business and enhance client service.
2. The most successful Internet-based marketing plans focus on all three components of effective online client development: visibility, design and content.
3. Search-engine optimization — the process of enhancing elements of a Web site to drive qualified traffic to a site through directory placements, link building, and natural results from search engines like Google, Yahoo! and MSN — is a critical part of improving a law firm’s online visibility.
4. Effective site design enables a law firm to communicate its unique identity and appeal to its target audience.
5. E-newsletters and news feeds are just a few of the content tools your firm can use to engage site visitors, convert them to clients, then keep them coming back to your site. To support this, it is important to incorporate well-written, engaging content created by experts who understand principles of effective web marketing as well as the law.

Introduction: Law Firms, the Internet, and Three Steps to Online Success

The number of people going online — to get information and make important decisions about their lives — continues to increase. The legal profession is no exception. According to a June 2005 Harris Interactive Poll, more Americans now use the Internet to find a lawyer than any other source.

For law firms, the Internet is a powerful tool for finding qualified prospects, educating them about the firm's services then converting them into clients. For consumers, the Web simplifies legal research and the process of finding an attorney.

But while it's easy to conclude that the Internet is where prospects are at — and that connecting with them is critical to your long-term growth — that still leaves some key questions unanswered. Such as ...

- In the fast-growing free-for-all of the Internet, how do you reach your potential clients (and more of them)?
- While good looks are great, do eye-catching Web sites add real value?
- And what strategies convert site visits into actual cases?

In the expanding online market for legal services, the most successful law firms focus on three essential (and related) areas: building *visibility* via search engines and directories; using distinctive site *design* to set the firm apart; and delivering persuasive *content* that engages prospects and deepens client relationships.

Visibility

More than two-thirds of all solo and small law firms now have a Web presence. If you've been online to survey the competition, you know the importance of visibility — of taking steps to make sure that your firm stands out.

How can you increase your odds of getting noticed? To raise your online profile, the best place to start is by ensuring that your Web site is search-engine friendly.

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Search engines are Web sites designed to help Internet users find information. The most popular — Google, Yahoo! and MSN — together account for more than 80% of online searches.

The process of boosting your visibility with these highly trafficked, influential search engines is called search engine optimization, or SEO. The goal of SEO is to attract more, and better qualified, prospects to your site. To improve the chance, in other words, that your Web site will reach the right people at the right time. The higher a Web site ranks for a given search, the greater the chance that site will be visited by a search-engine user.

A multitude of factors can affect search-engine rankings. Domain age, for example: Partly due to concerns about spam, established Web addresses typically fare better than newly created sites. Another is how you put your name in front of the search engines. With some search engines you can pay for V.I.P. treatment, while others won't accept paid inclusions.

The most important factor, however, is ensuring that your site is optimized for search engines. Ensuring that it's regularly updated, easy for search engines to scan and contains a high percentage of keywords and key phrases unique to your practice areas, geographic locations and client base can greatly improve your efforts.

That's critical because on an ongoing basis, search engines use indexing software commonly called "spiders" to examine Web sites, then use that information to respond to search queries. While the formulas are complex and frequently change, sites with fresh, keyword-rich content typically rank highest.

To use keywords and key phrases effectively:

- Cast a wide net. Non-attorneys may not always search by legal terms of art. Include "lawyer" and "attorney" on your site. Reference "car crash" and "auto wreck" in addition to "motor vehicle accident." By using the language of your future clients, you'll rank higher in their search results.
- Cover your geographic area (e.g., "Milwaukee," "Wisconsin," "eastern Wisconsin," "Midwest").
- Don't overdo it. Stilted text containing too many keywords may attract more hits from search engines, but those visitors won't stay long.

About 40% of all Web searches are unique — the so-called Long Tail (“car crash on Highway 43 Milwaukee,” for example). Well-written content that includes unique keywords and key phrases targeted at your audience can help you capture those one-of-a-kind searches.

Attracting the attention of search tools is important not only due to the sheer number of competing Web sites, but also the behavior of search-engines users. Research shows that most choose the sites they visit from the first page of results generated by their query.

Inbound links and legal directories. Inbound links — links from other Web sites that direct users to your site — also affect visibility. They drive more prospects to your law firm. And the more quality links you build from relevant, law-related sites, the more popular and visible your site becomes.

Like a frequently cited legal case, when authoritative Web sites link to your site it raises your credibility. Links from authoritative sources such as bar associations are among the most influential. Links from other law firms, online directories, and legal sites such as FindLaw.com also support an effective link building campaign.

To increase inbound links and overall site visibility, law firms should also consider paid advertising opportunities like banner ads and top listings, as well as legal directories (sites where individuals and businesses can research legal issues and browse firm profiles) and matching services. Linking your site to a directory or matching service connects you with highly motivated prospects who are actively looking for representation.

Frequently, listings that appear on the most-visited legal directories such as **findlaw.com** rank higher in search-engine results than a law firm’s own site.

Title tags. Search engines also factor in the information in title tags, alt tags and other elements of HTML programming when compiling their rankings. While less visible than the text and graphics on your site, good HTML programming — and the smart use of navigational tools like site maps — can make your site significantly more search-engine friendly.

Title tags, which are used as the anchor text on a search-engine results page and which also appear at the very top of the Web browser, are particularly important for optimizing the visibility of your site. A good title tag should:

- Be unique to each individual page of the site.

- Include the most important keywords for that page of your site. Too many keywords dilute the importance of an individual keyword in the title tag.
- Meet current industry standards and best practices for length, not exceeding 120 characters.

The way that you write your title tag is the way a search engine like Google will display it in search results. For that reason, be sure your title tags will make sense to a search-engine user. Like the content on your site, your title tags should take into account both the user experience and search engine optimization.

The Bottom Line on Visibility: *Optimizing your site for search engines is critical for attracting potential clients. Key elements of successful search engine optimization include keywords and key phrases, increasing inbound links from authoritative Web sites, and your site's HTML programming, particularly title tags. Legal directories and matching services can help law firms connect with more qualified prospects.*

Design

Improved visibility drives traffic to your Web site. Can you hold the attention of those prospects and convert them to clients? Your window of opportunity is small, because on the Internet you have just seconds to impress site visitors before they click away.

One key to engaging potential clients is effective Web site design. Like a well-decorated office lobby, site design can create a positive first impression about your firm. Like good lighting in a store, it can make your “product” — the legal expertise that you communicate on your site — more appealing. Site design is an opportunity to project a strong, professional image, and to communicate directly and persuasively with your target audience.

Establish a niche. One of the most important choices a law firm makes in designing its Web site is what it leaves out.

That's because on the Internet, being all things to all people is a great way to reach no one. Instead, focus on what sets you apart. Use images, words and the organization of your site to communicate your firm's unique identity.

That can include:

“... on the Internet, being all things to all people is a great way to reach no one.”

- Photos and other visual elements that identify the city or region you serve and represent your practice areas.
- Headlines, section heads and other prominent blocks of copy that target your niche and stress unique capabilities (Spanish-language expertise, for example).
- A consistent color palette and tone that appeals to your unique audience.

While an aggressive tone and bold colors can work for a criminal-law firm, for example, visitors to a family-law site may be swayed by a softer approach.

Strive for clarity, not complexity. Keep your site straightforward and easy to navigate. A user-friendly Web site should welcome the visitor with a layout that's clear and intuitive and instructions that are plain and unambiguous.

Is your contact information displayed prominently on every page, for example? Can a visitor easily navigate your site without clicking the “Back” button? Is any important information buried in the navigation hierarchy where it's difficult to find? Good design minimizes confusion and allows your prospect to concentrate on the site's content.

Clear, straightforward site design can also promote visibility. Complicated multimedia bells-and-whistles, for example, often are barriers to entry for both site visitors and search engines. They can drive search rankings down, besides making for a poor customer experience.

Many people find the law intimidating. Your Web site shouldn't reinforce that view.

***The Bottom Line on Design:** A well-designed Web site does more than just look good. It captures the attention of prospects and helps you stand out. Use images, colors and words that appeal to your target audience. Most importantly, ensure your site is easy to use.*

Content

Effective site design encourages prospects to stay for a closer look. Content converts them to clients and turns new business into long-term relationships.

A Web site should describe your practice areas and provide attorney profiles, but also offer practical information about the law. When prospects visit a Web site for the first time, their first priority typically is to learn about their legal problem, not necessarily to review attorney credentials. Strive for content that's up-to-date, clearly written and concise — because on the Web, readers scan for information and will move on quickly if they don't find what they need.

A good rule of thumb is roughly 250 words of text per Web page, an easily scannable amount for most Web users.

Effective content educates first-time visitors about the law and your firm and brings existing clients back for more. To achieve those goals, you can use:

- **FAQs:** Typically the most-visited area of a law firm's site, particularly for first-time visitors. FAQs are an opportunity to demystify your firm and speak directly to prospects.
- **Newsletters and articles:** Besides providing for regular contact with clients, newsletters and articles position you as the go-to source for information in your areas of expertise.
- **Results:** "Results" pages are an effective way to demonstrate expertise. (For ethical reasons, however, many states require a disclaimer that "results may vary," while other states require that results must be from past clients of your firm, not your current matters.)
- **Weblogs:** "Blogs" are an excellent way to create an informal online dialogue with clients. They're easy to update and can drive repeat visits to your site. To gain maximum value from your blog, however, be sure to write new posts for it at least once or twice a week.
- **Landing pages:** If your firm has a niche you want to stress, consider assigning it a separate landing page with a unique URL. You may also want to consider a separate landing page for different locations or languages. Landing pages can attract a more qualified prospect seeking specific information.
- **Practice center pages:** Topical practice centers allow you to address specific areas of interest for potential or existing clients. They can include articles, FAQs and other information written on a particular topic.

- **FindLaw News:** A FindLaw News subscription puts links to current news and case studies on your site, refreshed daily. You can choose from more than 60 topics.

Content tools like newsletters, blogs and case updates keep your site fresh and relevant. That makes for a better client experience, but can also boost your visibility on the Web. Search engines typically reward sites that have regularly updated content, and assign a lower rank to outdated material.

Once you've established a client relationship, your Web site can also help you extend it by improving your efficiency and case-management expertise. Password-protected client areas and collaborative extranets, for example, enable you to share documents and case information in a secure online environment. They also demonstrate your technical know-how and commitment to client service.

Today's Web-savvy consumer clicks past outdated articles and cliched marketing-speak. Online success depends on engaging people with content that's relevant, timely and in dynamic formats that encourage repeat visits.

***The Bottom Line on Content:** Once prospects find your Web site, you need to capture their attention with compelling, useful content. E-newsletters, case studies and blogs are just a few of the tools you can use to establish — and then extend — client relationships. Typically, Web sites with relevant, frequently updated content are ranked higher by search engines, further increasing your chances of being seen by potential clients.*

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Analyze and Improve Your Site

The Internet is a dynamic marketing tool, but many Web sites are treated like glorified print brochures. They're rarely reviewed or updated. To take full advantage of the Web, periodically review your online visibility, design and content strategy to ensure that it's working effectively and in line with your marketing goals.

Software programs are available to help you evaluate your site. They're often included when you sign up with a Web site provider. They can help you determine the most popular areas of your site, how visitors navigate from page to page, and what improvements can enhance the site for your prospects and clients.

Conclusion

The Web is constantly changing. So are the needs of your clients, and your firm's practice development goals. To make Internet marketing work for you, it's critical to regularly review and upgrade your online presence in the key areas of visibility, content and design.

If you outsource your online marketing, look for a provider who can assist you with the entire process:

- Bringing potential clients to your Web site through search engine optimization.
- Creating a positive impression of your firm via design strategies.
- Delivering pertinent content that brings clients and prospects to your site, and keeps them coming back for more.

Remember that the best information is wasted if the right prospects aren't finding your site at the right time.

Increasing the number of visitors to your site, but then providing little of value when they arrive, also won't add to your bottom line.

But firms that address all three aspects of successful online marketing — visibility, design and content — have a great opportunity to win business and maximize the return on their Internet investment.

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