

# **The ABCs of SEO (Search Engine Optimization)**

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Articles sometimes come to us in mysterious ways. Recently, we taught a seminar on legal websites. A part of the seminar, of course, was about search engine optimization (SEO), essentially, the art of getting the highest possible rankings from the search engines by properly constructing your site. At the end, folks made a number of kind comments on their evaluation forms, but we were struck by how often we saw some variation of the same comment: "Great seminar – especially enjoyed the SEO portion – I'd like to see a whole seminar on SEO." Rather to our surprise, it seems that many lawyers now understand how important SEO is, even if they are clueless about how to achieve it.

So let's start with a . . . .

## **Bedrock Principle, Never To Be Forgotten:**

Monies invested (sensibly) in websites ALWAYS return the investment, usually many times over. The average rate of return, according to legal marketing guru Larry Bodine, is 8 to 1. On the other side of the fence, another legal marketing expert, Dale Tinchler, says that the rate of return on yellow page ads has now dropped to less than 2 to 1. We believe both of these stats are very close to accurate. We sense that those two factoids may have your attention!

Followed up with . . .

## **Bedrock Statistics, To Be Taken to Heart:**

Studies vary, but all agree that more than 60% of those who are looking for professional services begin their search online. And that number has gone up, significantly, every year since the Internet became a part of our lives. The printed Yellow Pages is dying a slow but steady death.

According to a survey conducted by RMP Directional Media (an online marketing research company) in 2007, 82% of those who search for a local business end up contacting local businesses to further their inquiries, and 61% of them become customers.

66% of Internet users are looking for information on a particular legal issue when seeking out a lawyer's website. They are not looking for advice, just practical legal information. The right content coupled with the proper presentation will help potential clients want to hire the firm. (attorneyonline.com 2007). Those too are compelling statistics.

And finally move to the heart of the matter . . . .

## The ABCs of SEO

One of the curious things about search engine optimization (SEO) is how little people understand it. So please bear us – if you can absorb the material that follows, you will be well on your way to developing a firm website that REALLY helps your bottom line.

Here are some of the most frequently asked questions:

- 1) When we do search engine optimization, which search engine do we optimize for?

Easy answer – optimize for Google and no one else. Let other chips fall where they may. For the moment, and the foreseeable future, Google is God. The numbers speak loud and clear in the following graph, reflecting statistics through November 2007. For purposes of analyzing trends, Yahoo! has been in a declining mode, and MSN and Ask have seen slight gains. But in the end, the 200 pound Gorilla is Google and that isn't likely to change anytime in the future, notwithstanding a possible acquisition of Yahoo by Microsoft. Even if Microsoft could successfully combine and retain the current numbers reflected in the chart, it would be hard pressed to make serious inroads into Google.

### Web Search Market Share and Volume

(Top Four web search engine's share of searches, volume, and performance)



Engine	Market Share			Query Volume (millions)			Volume Change	
	Nov-07	Oct-07	Nov-06	Nov-07	Oct-07	Nov-06	M-O-M	Y-O-Y
Google	68.9%	68.0%	59.0%	5,581	5,448	3,733	2.5%	49.5%
Yahoo!	17.4%	18.1%	24.7%	1,408	1,453	1,564	-3.1%	-10.0%
MSN/Live	9.2%	9.2%	8.7%	742	737	550	0.7%	35.0%
Ask	3.9%	3.9%	4.2%	316	316	264	-0.1%	19.6%

- 2) Do we lose anything by optimizing specifically for Google?

Doubtful. There really doesn't seem to be a great deal of difference between how the various search engines rank websites. Sites that are Google-optimized seem to show up just fine in other search engines. So the best advice is to go with the behemoth.

- 3) How does Google rank websites?

Stellar question. Tough answer. Lots of people pretend to know, but the truth is, Google uses a complicated algorithm made up of many components – and this algorithm is changing constantly. Those who make their living at SEO often bemoan the rapidity of the change, and allege that it occurs on a daily basis. Moreover, the algorithm is protected as fiercely as the formula for Coke. Nonetheless, those who study rankings have a reasonably good idea of what

works – and what does not. As our Sensei site comes up very well on Google, we have some credibility that we know what we’re talking about, but we want to reiterate that no one really knows how Google ranks websites. Remembering that what follows is a **best guess**, and nothing more, here are the elements we think are most important, pretty much in order of priority:

- Page title – make sure this includes your name and likely keywords that users will employ when searching for you.
  - Content on your site – the deeper and broader, the better – and yes, keywords count, but never “stuff” them – use as many as permissible within the bounds of graceful writing and the delivery of useful information to a site visitor. Content is assuredly not dead – in our view, it remains “king.”
  - Content on the home page is the most important to Google, and many theorize that hyperlinked content and page subtitles are given additional weight.
  - Inbound links – how many **quality** sites link to you? And how do they link? By firm name only? By keyword text? This is also one of the hardest things to achieve – you have to give someone a reason to link to you, and the majority of law firm sites, especially website for solo practitioners and small firms, are primarily promotional with little valuable information. In most cases, the inbound links are paid links from directories – which count, but are given far less weight because they are paid (yes, the Google gurus can discern the difference).
  - Your domain name – If someone is searching for baby gifts and you are babygifts.com, you have a definite edge, but it is only one factor, and certainly not the major one.
  - Your site’s currency – those sites that are not updated vanish quickly from the top rankings. Herein lies the problem for most law firms, which scurry about faster than mice in a cheese factory getting a new website done and then, almost invariably, let the site wither on the vine, untended except for minor alterations.
  - The age of your site – this is a rather new factor, probably introduced by Google as a way of letting brand new sites “stew” for a bit to sift out the scammers who put up new sites with high energy SEO initiatives, but who fold their tents and disappear when the law comes after them.
- 4) What about all those companies on the Net that promise that they can get you (quickly) to the top of the search results?

In general, these are snake oil salesmen. Search engine optimization is a long, hard process – it takes time and effort to cultivate a site that will get to the top of the rankings. Frequently, some of these folks who promise the moon try to cheat the system: for instance, they may have the site listed in link farms (essentially, phony sites that simply act as a bank of links to sites in a bogus attempt to boost the apparent popularity of a website, which is one factor search engines use to rank websites). Another trick is to use (for instance) white on white text on the home page to list keywords over and over, invisible to the human eye but picked up by the spider bots that search engines use to “crawl” websites. Alas, Google and the other search engines cottoned on to these tricks long ago and penalize (or even ban!) websites that use them. Of course, the seamy side of the SEO is constantly trying new gambits –and they may succeed, but only briefly, as the search engines have proven that they are adept at sniffing out deceit and ruthless in penalizing it.

- 5) What is the significance of the kind of site – does the amount of competition hurt the chances for a high ranking?

Absolutely. Let us take, for example, a small divorce law firm in Fairfax, Virginia. Such a firm is unlikely to have a site that is both broad and deep – the website is likely to be fairly modest in size and scope. Given the fact that most users will likely use geography and area of law to search (e.g. “divorce lawyer” and “Fairfax Virginia”) and also given the fact that there are a LOT of divorce lawyers in Fairfax, Virginia, the competition for rankings is going to be severe. This is precisely where SEO can really help. But it would be a mistake to expect overnight success – this is definitely a case where “slow and steady wins the race.” But if you practice, say, aviation law in Fairfax, Virginia, you may vault to the top quickly!

- 6) So . . . what’s next?

Not an easy quest, no question. First, determine who your prospective clients might be. What age? What gender? What income level? What are their “pain points” that you can touch? Are you in search of clients from the public or are you looking for referrals from colleagues? There’s a huge difference in approach between the two. Once you have that in mind, you can work on figuring out graphics that will hook a site visitor and text that will keep their attention, and ultimately (we hope) convert them to clients (or to lawyers that want to refer clients). Creativity is key. No stock graphics please – no courthouses, no gavels, no lawbooks. Nothing that smacks of being a cookie cutter site. If you practice criminal law, you might want to show a really good photo of someone being arrested, handcuffed, etc. – now that’s a photo that your potential clients can identify with!

7) How does one figure out which keywords are most valuable?

You have unerringly hit upon the \$60,000 question. We are happy to say that there is a most excellent tool to assist you. The tool is called Wordtracker and is available at [www.wordtracker.com](http://www.wordtracker.com). It is subscription based: 1 year costs \$329, 1 month \$59 and 1 week \$30. You may be just fine with using it for a week if you are diligent in devising keywords (don't forget to look at your competitors' sites for ideas for keywords) and then studying the results and perhaps revising the keywords (which usually are phrases, not just single words) to see what that does to the Wordtracker results.

8) How do you broaden and deepen your site for better SEO?

Without question, this takes time and dogged work. You also need to decide what kind of content will appeal to site visitors. They will certainly appreciate information on your area of law – articles and news blurbs are great. They will like case digests. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are always popular. Never underestimate the power of blogs, though you need to make sure that you can muster the time to provide regular and quality content for a blog. The possibilities are endless, so choose carefully, picking that which has the most allure for site visitors and which you know you can maintain. Nothing is worse than stale content. Visitors will disappear quickly and search engine rankings will drop like a rock! And this, lamentably is the fate of most law firm websites. After producing a diamond of a website, it becomes an orphaned child, and is soon reduced to charcoal through benign neglect.

9) How do law firms stay on top of SEO?

If you're big enough to have in-house marketing and website design/SEO, you are blessed. Some smaller firms do manage to have marketing committees, which track SEO on a regular basis. But if you're smaller than that, you probably want to outsource this function. Because the Google algorithm changes so much, it is probably a good idea to have your site reviewed for optimization at least annually. Once it's been done right to begin with, and you have suffered the "big bang" to the budget, the updates should be considerably more modest in cost.

10) What's an alcoholic?

Don't laugh – it's a real word. An alcoholic is always searching, usually daily, on keywords to check his/her site's Google ranking. You'll make yourself crazy – resist the temptation. Do it no more than quarterly and you won't need a 12 step program for your addiction.

You may, just may, be able to be a DIY (do it yourself) in this area. We learned it ourselves, becomes proficient at it, and now receive about 20% of our business from the website – and the collateral impact it has as users "check us out" is phenomenal. But if

you don't have the time (and how many busy lawyers do?) get a professional to assist. Lawyers ask constantly what single investment they can make to help grow their practice and our answer is always the same: Invest in a first class creative website and pay attention to – you guessed it – the ABCs of SEO!

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