

ELECTRONIC MARKETING: HARNESSING THE WEB'S WHIZBANG, PART I

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Whizbang. What a great word to describe the manifold powers of the Web to assist lawyers with electronic marketing. Regrettably, the powers of the Web seem so overwhelming that many lawyers fear to tread in this unknown territory – or they merely stick a toe in the water instead of embracing the extraordinary marketing tools afforded by the electronic era.

Let us inspire you. Studies have shown that spending just five hours a week on marketing (of all kinds) can raise your annual income by \$37,000. Spend more time, make more money. And the results can be like a snowball rolling down a hill – have a bigger client base, get more referrals and a more constant level of work. Research by Thomson Findlaw found that 56% of consumers needed a lawyer in the last two years. What did they need to have done? The study broke down this way: personal finance (44%), employment issue (31%), traffic offense (26%), health care (25%), housing/real estate (20%), personal injury (18%), family or domestic (18%) government assisted programs (17%), community issue (16%), consumer fraud/defective products (13%), crime victim (12%). As you can see, many of these consumers had a need for multiple legal services during the two years.

So how do we reach these folks? Lawyers have traditionally relied on yellow page ads, networking amongst neighbors in the community and fellow lawyers, and sometimes newspaper ads or articles in legal publications. If this is what you're doing, it is time to think again.

The authors have consulted the yellow pages exactly once in the past year. Our six kids can't even remember the last time they looked at the yellow pages. It's a brand new world: you go online to order pizza from Domino's, to get movie theater tickets, to get hotel/airline reservations, and to order parts for your malfunctioning dishwasher. Newspapers? We still read them, but not our kids – they get their news from TV or CCN online. Newspaper circulation is declining each year, by 2% or more in some years. The action has moved online. If you want to appeal to those folks who are online (an ever-increasing majority), you too must be online – and as powerfully as possible.

Where to start??? Without question, with your website. It is common today for lawyers to report that more than 20% of their business comes directly from the Internet. If you factor out your repeat business, lawyers are reporting that more than 50% of the remainder of their clients have visited their websites after seeing a print ad, hearing about them from a friend, being referred by another attorney, reading an article they wrote, seeing them lecture, etc. etc. People go to websites to find directions to law offices, to see a photo of their prospective lawyer and, most importantly, to see if they feel that this lawyer has the expertise to serve them well.

How well do you stack up? Clearly, if you have no website at all, you've got work to do. Ditto if you don't have your own domain name. Clients are increasing web savvy – no one wants to do business with jlawyer@aol.com – she can't possibly be a “real” lawyer or a “respected” lawyer if she doesn't own her own domain. For the bargain price of \$99.95, you can buy your domain for five years at www.NetworkSolutions.com (our preference, simply because we can always reach a human being – better yet, one who speaks English – if there's a problem). You can buy them even cheaper from other domain name registrars (many lawyers use www.godaddy.com), but may not find the service as first class as Network Solutions.

How do you go about designing an effective web site? Rule #1: don't use your son or your cousin. Get a pro. Websites need to be tested against all commonly used browsers and there are many tricks and tips that an amateur won't be aware of. Rule #2: Design for Google. No one else really matters. Though the stats vary, roughly 75% of those online use Google for searching. As a fringe benefit, if you design for Google, you'll do well by most of the other search engines as well.

The trick, of course, is designing well for Google. The infamous Google algorithm, which determines how well sites show up on Google, is guarded with the same fervor as the recipe for Coke. Worse yet, the algorithm changes, especially as those who would like to “cheat the system” (putting white keywords on white text was a classic in the old days) must be thwarted. Google does a credible job of catching the cheats, so our advice is to do what we did – create a site that is wholly honest, broad and deep in good content specific to what you do. Does this work? Heck, yes. Try searching for “computer forensics” and Virginia” to see how well it works for Sensei Enterprises. Did it happen overnight? No, not even remotely.

A word here about search engine optimization (SEO) companies. There are some credible companies and there are a lot of snake oil salesmen. Beware of any promise that you can be #1 on Google for a price. First, we'd worry about the company trying to cheat to get that result and second, we'd worry that you were throwing your money down a rat hole. Good SEO companies (and some web design companies do SEO as well) will let you know that this is an ongoing process. If all you do is wine importation law or bicycle head injuries, you might stand a good chance of coming up well, because you have a niche practice. But if you're a divorce lawyer, a personal injury lawyer, or a business lawyer, forget it. There are too many of you out there.

Remember that most folks looking for a lawyer search by two things: location and area of law. Your site should reflect those things in multiple locations, but most notably on the home page. People used to try to stack these sorts of keywords (also known as metatags) in the source code of the website. Hence, Google now ignores metatags when it ranks site.

So what does Google like? We don't pretend to know the exact specifics or the precise order, but most experts agree that the following are very important:

1. Domain name
2. Site title (the first header on the home page)
3. Inbound links (links from other sites to you – forget the link farms where you link to them and they to you because Google discounts those and may actually penalize your site)
4. Other headers on your home page
5. Hyperlinked text on your home page
6. Changes on your site which indicate currency
7. The depth and breadth of your website, including the overall frequency of recurring terms
8. The remaining home page language

It's not just Google you have to design for. Who are your potential clients? If it is Joe Sixpack, you need to talk directly to him. Perhaps you have bold print - "ARE YOU IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW? WE CAN HELP" along with a picture of a man being handcuffed. You are now talking directly to Joe – and his family. On the other hand, if you are marketing to corporate executives, you need a "Brooks Brothers" kind of website. Mind you, don't think gavels and law books – that's old hat and doesn't tell anyone anything. Think creatively, use your imagination, and stretch your use of the English language and photos to say something new.

Check out www.hollandhart.com to see how refreshing the page causes a new "featured practice area" to appear – a nice way of addressing the issue of a larger law firm that does many things. In the small/mid-size category, look at www.visalaw.com which has a great domain name and a wealth of useful resources – as well as a clear way to contact an attorney or ask a question. To get more great ideas, check out the law firm website reviews at <http://www.internetmarketingattorney.com/reviews.htm>

Offer things on your website that folks want. Examples?

1. A portfolio about your firm.
2. A white paper you've written.
3. A newsletter they can subscribe to. This costs a little money to set up and time to keep up, but most lawyers who do it report that it works well.
4. A blog (more on that in Part II of this article).
5. A podcast (more on that too).
6. A way to contact you with a description of their problem.
7. Reference material that might be useful to them.

8. Useful links – make sure these open in a new window so they don't “leave” your site entirely.
9. A press room – especially if you are trying to attract media attention or want to showcase what you've been up to.
10. A map and directions to your office – don't forget parking instructions if needed.

No matter how spiffy your website looks today, remember that websites inevitably age. Website design and content is an ever-moving target so make sure you review your site periodically to keep it current, fresh, and modern. As the old chestnut goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression!

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