

Search Engine Marketing—Trick or Treat?

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If you are a small to mid-size law firm—even with spam blocking software on your network—chances are you’ve been targeted by a Search Engine Marketing, SEO/SEM expert or company with claims of “PAGE ONE RANKING GUARANTEED,” or “GET RESULTS FAST,” or “EXPERT PROVEN SEO PLAN.”

One has to wonder: Does the secret to increasing traffic to my website boil down to some kind of trickery? And if I buy one of these SEO offers, do I really get the promised “treat” of increased traffic?

Well, the answers are yes, no and maybe. Unless you intend to become an instant search engine techie, three issues will come to bear on your SEM services buying decision:

1. Who can I trust?
2. What should I do?
3. What results will I get? and...
4. What does it all mean anyway?

To provide some instant grounding, let’s answer these questions first:

First, don’t trust anyone. That’s right. No one knows your business better than you do. Don’t trust anyone with your mission, vision, values statements, goals and objectives. Develop a Marketing Plan that puts all of this in writing before you do anything. Thoroughly evaluate all marketing strategies, tactics, and tools, including media buying and SEM services, as to their “fit” in your overall marketing strategy and plan. Start by defining your target audiences, then focus on programs designed to help you retain clients, and those that help you achieve your growth objectives.

Secondly, what do you do? Plan to do something every month to reach your targeted internet prospects directly. Do not forget that your website is a tool to help you communicate with existing clients and your site can work hard for you to retain them. Add as much useful content and interactivity as you can afford. And make sure all of your online and offline marketing programs are integrated, which means your print, media, internet and PR all play together as one organic symphony. Doing anything less is creating just more noise in the marketplace.

Next, whatever you do, measure results in terms of your Business Plan. Hits and sessions (visits) are nice to measure and may give you some reassurance that your internet dollars were spent wisely, but unless your website is there for entertainment or your firm is engaging in purely philanthropic pursuits with your website, then I suggest you measure how many unique visitors convert to clients and how your investment in internet marketing compares with your annual billed hours or revenue goals. These are results that matter to a business.

And lastly, here's the good news---you don't HAVE to know what it all means. Wouldn't you rather "stick to your knitting"—focus on providing quality legal and professional consulting services? All businesses, and especially small and mid-size firms, are prone to distraction. Although it is honorable to want to know about everything that touches your firm, in reality, what counts is your clients' priorities. Your competitors will always be nipping at your heels. What makes a satisfactory client experience will continue to challenge you. The results your clients see in verdicts and settlements are far more important than your website's page views per month. Your clients' continual feedback on the quality of your consultation and litigation process is golden. Lose sight of that, and your firm is soon a blip on the historical screen of jurisprudence.

But let's get back to SEO, SEM, and PPC because it's fun to sound smart at parties.

There are essentially three critical ways to reach prospects via your website:

With a good Search Engine Optimization (SEO) plan, you can improve the volume and quality of traffic to your website from search engines via natural ("organic" or "algorithmic") search results. The earlier your website is presented in the search results, or the higher it "ranks," the more prospects will visit your site. SEO considers how search algorithms work and what people search for. This is the "trick" and SEO efforts may involve a site's html coding, presentation, and structure, as well as fixing problems that could prevent search engine indexing from finding your website. Other tricks known as "Black Hat" SEO or spamdexing, use methods such as link farms and keyword stuffing that tend to harm search engine user experience. Search engines look for sites that employ these techniques and zap them. After all, Google, Yahoo and MSN maintain their position as the top 3 search engines because they work tirelessly to make sure users find what they need. They aren't tricked easily.

Search Engine Marketing: SEO is considered better than PPC (Pay Per Click) as a

marketing tactic primarily because organic is better than synthetic. Web searchers (your prospects and clients) know that when search engines find the top 10 sites based on a natural keyword search through valid content, that these will be better than the PAID advertisement listed on the right hand column of their screen. It doesn't take long for any internet user to notice that.

With PPC however, you get targeted, immediate traffic to your site by bidding on and purchasing keywords. However, expect lower credibility because users know it's paid advertising. You should also expect to have to monitor, control and continue the bidding process ad infinitum. That's not sticking to your knitting, is it?

Many consultants say you need both. Just like your Marketing Plan includes both advertising AND Public Relations. And like Advertising and PR, both SEO and PPC serve a unique purpose. The answer: do as much as you can afford and whatever you have time to monitor and measure.

Key Words and Content Links: But most importantly, **USEFUL CONTENT IS KING!** Incoming links are essentially “votes” for your site, and specific and targeted key word density on your website will ensure search engines will find you through their spidering and indexing. So you need both a link and keyword strategy to be found easily and often.

When you come right down to it, why are people doing all this searching on the internet anyway? They are looking for answers, information, products, services, clues, solutions. Many will visit your website out of curiosity or to get to know your firm better, but most of the revenue-generating-prospect-traffic will come from those who don’t know you....those who are looking for something that your firm offers. Competitively, your firm is not the only one offering free consultations, personal injury representation, criminal defense, or legal services of all kinds. So, when a prospect views the Google search space and types “divorce lawyers,” what are the top 10 results today?

www.divorcelawfirms.com
www.familylaw.freeadvice.com
www.divorcenet.com
www.divorce-lawyer-source.com
www.divorceinteractive.com
www.lawyers.com
www.100divorce.com
www.familylaw.lawyers.com
www.lawyersdivorce.com
www.medlawplus.com

And these will change over time based on their intrinsic value, how often they are changed by the authors and what key words go in and out of fashion.

How do you compete with these websites? Maybe you don’t. Some of these links are valuable as directories or they sell ad space or will link to you to provide those all important incoming links or votes of confidence. These votes will be more important to get qualified leads heading to your site rather than actually being in the top 10.

But let’s get back to your Business and Marketing Plans.

In your Business Plan, front and center is your “Value Proposition” for the professional services offered by your firm. If you also develop a VALUE PROPOSITION specific to your website, this will drive your overall strategy, making marketing decisions that much easier and self-evident:

Have Values and Deliver VALUE!

Here are some VALUE PROPOSITIONS your website may offer clients and prospects:

- Content that is factual, helpful, informative, and interesting, much of which cannot be found easily elsewhere.
- Legal resources, solutions, contacts and services to help prospects manage their legal lives.

- Easy to find information and services via tightly organized content, easy-to-reach contact links, phone, fax, email, registration, and easy and intuitive site navigation.
- Continuing positive dialogue with prospects and clients by responding to inquiries instantly and with more detail in 24 hours.
- Attorneys, paralegals and assistants accessible and available at reasonable and flexible fee structures.
- Active and up-to-date content on the legal issues affecting all of us today.

A final thought about CONTENT.

Some will say that the internet age ushered in a set of new rules for marketing. Now that you can send your message to the world in blogs, news releases, podcasts, online forums, viral marketing and social networking, using more sophisticated technology than ever before. And some will say you need to be expert in all of this. But rest assured, the technology is not the entire issue. Using all of this to spew tired and self-serving rhetoric will get you nowhere. Concentrate on presenting unique ideas, thoughts, and solutions and you will become the "thought leader" in your field of expertise. Yes, you use the new technology to reach prospects where they live and listen every day. But it is "thought leadership" recognition that will enhance your reputation in the community of valuable prospects who will consistently beat a path to your door.

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