

Pros and Cons of Four Internet Marketing Strategies for Law Firms

A LexisNexis® Practice Guide

Introduction

Small law firm attorneys can sometimes feel as though they are under siege when it comes to the crowd of self-appointed experts eager to give them advice on how to market their practices on the internet. The number of internet marketing vendors and sales reps is massive, each with their own programs to pitch and limited-time-only pricing to offer.

With all of this noise, how do you know the right strategy for your firm? How can you separate the flashy sales pitches from the smart marketing techniques?

The purpose of this LexisNexis® Practice Guide is to help attorneys make the best decisions when it comes to managing a crucial aspect of the business side of their firms: marketing their practices to potential clients. Rather than promoting the entire range of marketing options available to law firms, we're going to assess four major categories of internet marketing and share insights from a respected industry thought leader on the advantages and disadvantages of each tactic for various types of small firms:

- Pay-Per-Click Marketing
- Search Engine Optimization
- Lawyer Directories
- Social Media

We thank you for taking the time to read through these practical tips and hope they're helpful to you in the development of your practice.

Setting a Winning Strategy

Once upon a time in the legal profession, a small law firm just needed to focus on doing high-quality legal work for clients, hire a professional staff of employees to provide good service and maintain a nice office that was pleasant to visit. That basic combination led to referrals to other clients through positive "word of mouth" and a firm could get away with doing minimal external marketing such as Yellow Pages advertising.

Those days are gone.

A new generation of solo practitioners and start-up law firms has introduced bold and aggressive internet marketing tactics that deliver consistent new client leads. They deploy creative websites and social media platforms, then load up on cost-effective online advertising campaigns that seek out potential clients who might be a match for the firm's areas of practice.

The good news is that the internet provides an equal opportunity channel for lawyers seeking to attract new clients.

“Whether you’re a 30-year practitioner or you’re just out of law school, there are tremendous opportunities to grow a small law practice through the internet,” said Matt Starosciak, author of *The Lawyer Marketing Book*, who practiced law in both small and large law firms and is now one of the nation’s leading experts in internet marketing for law firms. “You just have to make the right decisions when it comes to internet marketing strategies.”

There are four major internet marketing strategies that are easily accessible to small law firms, but not all of them make sense for every type of firm. It’s important to understand the pros and cons of each of these strategies so that a practitioner can make the best decision about where to invest their money, time and energies.

Pay-Per-Click (PPC) Marketing

“PPC marketing is essentially a dynamic bidding process that places businesses at the top of the search engines—such as Google™, Yahoo!® and Bing®—for specific keyword queries,” said Starosciak. “Generally speaking, the highest bidder on a specific search term rises to the top of the list of results, provided that the bidder’s law firm features content that is relevant to that search query.”

PPC marketing offers important advantages for law firms. First, it is a very flexible strategy. Law firms can turn on and off their PPC campaigns at any time, literally to the point of just running one for a few days around a holiday weekend and then

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turning it off for the next several months if they choose. In addition, firms can bid only on very specific desired search phrases and narrowly target a geographic area for their campaigns in order to maximize cost efficiency. Finally, an exact spending cap can be put in place for a PPC program, creating cost certainty and eliminating budget risk.

Second, PPC marketing delivers tremendous tracking tools to help law firms measure the effectiveness of their marketing investment. For example, it’s possible to see the exact search phrases used by individuals who went on to visit the firm’s website, enabling practitioners to adjust and recalibrate the keywords on which they wish to make bids in the future. Also, PPC allows firms to tie individual phone calls and email leads to specific clicks from a search engine—a powerful tracking and measuring tool that doesn’t really exist with most conventional marketing strategies.

“There are two types of law firms that benefit the most from PPC marketing,” said Starosciak. “One would be a firm with a very large marketing budget, which affords you sufficient resources to virtually guarantee that you’re going to attract a steady stream of client leads. The second would be a firm that has practice areas in very specific niches and can target those narrow types of cases with precise keywords that will bring your firm to the attention of those potential clients.”

For those firms that choose to embark on a PPC marketing campaign, Starosciak drew from his experience overseeing programs for dozens of law firms to identify five vendor statements to watch out for when considering who to hire to manage your PPC marketing campaign:

1. "We guarantee the following result."
2. "We are a Google Certified Partner."
3. "We start with keyword search."
4. "We don't disclose our management fee."
5. "It takes (anything more than one) months to adjust the program."

But for those firms that are a good fit for PPC marketing and who engage the right business partners to develop and execute the campaign, the return on investment can be significant.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

SEO is perhaps the most widely recognized internet marketing term, but unfortunately, it's also widely misunderstood. At its essence, SEO is an effort made to increase website rankings in the organic (natural) area of a search engine results page. So unlike PPC marketing that targets search results in the paid area on sites such as Google and Bing, SEO focuses on technical strategies for placing a law firm as high as possible on the normal results these engines produce for visitors.

SEO is crucial for law firms to consider as part of their internet marketing strategy because the majority of "clicks" from search engine users still take place within the organic search results, although that percentage has declined in recent years as PPC marketing has increased.

"The biggest advantage of SEO marketing is that it's free ... well, kinda free," said Starosciak. "The fact is that it doesn't cost a law firm anything for a Google user to click on a link to the firm's website when it displays in organic search results, but realistically you will need to invest some money in order to raise the visibility of your firm's site to Google's proprietary search algorithm." There are more than 100 ranking factors, but the two most significant contributors to a firm's search engine ranking are content and backlinks, items that can be improved with the assistance of an SEO professional.

There are also some important disadvantages about SEO marketing that small law firms should consider. First, it takes time to pay off. "A firm can set up and implement a pay-per-click campaign in a day, whereas it can take several months for an SEO program to deliver results," said Starosciak. Second, the results of an SEO initiative can be very unpredictable, which is the inevitable result of an unpaid marketing program. And finally, it is very difficult for law firms to vet SEO companies because of a very unlevelled playing field between vendors and lawyers who typically know very little about how costly SEO programs can become if not properly managed.

"A lot of law firms make the mistake of thinking they can rank much higher in search results than they realistically can attain on the major search engines," said Starosciak. "It is very difficult for a small law firm operating in a big city to muscle out global legal marketing companies and big-spending law firms who spend substantial budgets on SEO every single day. If a small firm is able to move up the rankings but is still outside of the top six results, will that really move the needle for that firm in terms of business development?"

As a result of these realities and other changes in the way that Google displays search results on both desktop and mobile devices, the percentage of clicks on organic results has declined significantly in recent years. Data from Wayfair.com indicates that the "click thru rate" on organic search results decreased by 55 percent on mobile and 25 percent on desktop from 2015 - 2017.

SEO marketing may be a valuable component of any law firm's internet marketing strategy. It's important, however, to understand the drawbacks and limitations when deciding whether and how much to invest in this tactical approach.

Lawyer Directories

Attorney directories are one of the oldest forms of law firm marketing, dating back to the original print volumes of practicing attorneys in the 1860s, which eventually became known as the ubiquitous Martindale-Hubbell® Law Directory. With the advent of the internet in the 1990s, the traditional print model gave way to online lawyer directories as a convenient way for individuals and business executives to identify potential law firms they might wish to retain.

“Online lawyer directory advertising can be a winning strategy for small law firms to leverage the search engine rankings and broad exposure of large vendors to drive traffic to the firm’s website,” explained Starosciak.

There are a number of popular options available to law firms who wish to explore this strategy, including the following well-known brands:

- Lawyers.comSM
- Martindale.com[®]
- Avvo.com

Online lawyer directories provide a few powerful advantages for law firms. First, this strategy can be an easy way to drive internet leads—the firm just writes a check to the directory publisher and waits for them to deliver the leads to the firm’s site. Second, it’s an approach that enables budget predictability and simplicity as the vendors will generally charge a flat monthly fee to advertise with them. And third, lawyer directories offer firms the ability to distinguish themselves from their competitors by promoting their client reviews, compelling video content or innovative online marketing capabilities such as real-time chat sessions.

At the same time, there are some potential disadvantages about which firms should beware. For starters, lawyer directories typically require long-term contracts, most often in the range of 12 months. Also, the number of top spots available to law firms who wish to have their sites appear within a specific area (e.g., geographic location, type of legal need, etc.) have been known to change without advance notice, leaving the firm suddenly on a crowded page with other competitors. And the analytics available from lawyer directories tend to be worse than what law firms are able to obtain from other internet marketing tactics (e.g., Google Analytics™).

“Lawyer directories can be a very good internet marketing option for firms that have been locked out of SEO and PPC marketing by larger competitors in their areas of practice,” said Starosciak. “It’s important to go in with your eyes wide open, however, as this approach will have limited impact on lead generation if not properly executed with the right setup and marketing message.”

Social Media

More than 7 in 10 U.S. law firms now maintain some level of presence on social media platforms, according to the ABA 2017 Legal Technology Survey. LinkedIn® ranks #1, with 53 percent of law firms reporting they market their practices there, and Facebook® ranks #2, used by approximately 40 percent of law firms for marketing purposes.

There are two primary strategies for social media marketing for law firms.

Engagement

One approach is to build a personality through engaging posts and constant interaction with followers. This requires letting people get to know the lawyer as a person by interacting with people on social media and opening up as an information resource to the internet audience.

“The advantage to social media engagement is that lawyers can get to know their community and members of the community can get to know them in a more personal way than is otherwise possible online,” said Starosciak. “The disadvantage is that this can be very time consuming for busy attorneys. Moreover, the law can be a very complex topic to navigate and it’s inevitable that a lawyer will stub their toe at some point during an online conversation.”

Advertising

The second approach is to just sit back and run ads. There are a variety of avenues for running targeted online advertising on social media platforms, especially with respect to Facebook. These may include simple banner ads, sponsored content or other targeted advertising.

“The biggest advantage to social media advertising is that it can deliver very inexpensive visibility for law firms in comparison to other internet advertising techniques,” said Starosciak. “In addition, ads can reach a very large number of people at one time or can be targeted to very narrow audiences. However, the biggest disadvantage to this tactic is that it tends to be ‘top of the funnel’ marketing in which law firms are spending money to reach people who will never have any use for their services. This may be good for brand building, but it’s not a very efficient way to cultivate well-qualified client leads.”

Social media marketing—whether it’s in the form of Engagement or Advertising—can be a useful component of the internet marketing mix. However, law firms that choose to invest in this tactic need to have patience that the return on this “mass market” investment may take longer to realize than they would prefer.

Conclusion

By its very nature, internet marketing thrives on innovation and this principle is alive in the legal vertical market as well. Looking to the future, there are some exciting new internet marketing strategies gaining velocity among legal service providers.

For example, “Geo-Fencing” is an emerging marketing tactic that involves beaming down marketing content to an individual’s mobile device when they are in a specific geographic location. “You can actually beam ads to the mobile phones of workers at a specific factory, letting them know that your law firm assists people who have suffered workplace injuries and need representation to secure their workers’ compensation benefits,” said Starosciak. This tight geographic ad targeting could become an extremely efficient marketing approach for law firms.

Another example is “Over The Top” (OTT) marketing that aligns with the way that millennials tend to consume content every day. “Anyone who has ever wanted to watch a video clip on YouTube™ or an online news site, but has been forced to watch a video ad before their content starts, has experienced OTT marketing,” said Starosciak. “This is likely going to become a staple of the future of internet marketing.”

For now, the four major internet marketing strategies explored in this practice guide are easily accessible to small law firms, but not all of them make sense for everyone. By better understanding the advantages and disadvantages of each of these strategies, a firm can make the best decision about where to invest their limited business development resources.

About this Practice Guide

The content in this practice guide is based on a national webcast, “Setting a Winning Law Firm Internet Strategy in 2018,” sponsored by LexisNexis and presented by Matt Starosciak, an attorney and law firm marketing consultant, and author of *The Lawyer Marketing Book*.

LexisNexis is committed to helping attorneys make the best decisions when it comes to managing the business side of their practices. The company hosts free informational webinars on a regular basis, featuring expert presentations on a wide range of topics relevant to the business and practice of law.

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