



Ahoy! Setting Sail with Your Online Marketing Efforts

By John F. Reed

As we say in Michigan, “If you don’t like the weather, wait a minute.” That same adage applies to marketing opportunities available to lawyers and law firms, especially online marketing. Regardless of your practice, establishing an online presence is a necessity, not a luxury.

Where and how you maintain that presence, however, requires forethought and commitment. Though it may seem that the online world is in constant flux, there are a few foundational practices you can put into place now.

Because Michigan is the Great Lakes State, let’s explore online marketing in a nautical context.

Know the ropes

The hard reality is that prospective clients will look you up on the Internet before contacting you, even if they have your business card in hand and a glowing referral from a trusted source. Depending on their legal needs, they will likely visit your website to review your biography, plug your name into

Google to peruse the results, or search for you on social media. And what they find—or don’t find—will determine whether you receive a call or e-mail from them or get passed by.

Although attorneys know this to be true, it is estimated that one in every four law firms does not have a website, and at a time when most people use mobile devices and not desktop computers to access the Internet, fewer than half of all law firm websites are mobile responsive.

Just having a website, however, isn’t enough. A successful website needs regular care and feeding with a constant flow of new content not only to attract the interest of search-engine algorithms, but also to demonstrate your awareness of emerging topics and legal developments that may affect your website’s visitors.

Drop anchor

It should come as no surprise that a lawyer’s website is the foundation for online marketing efforts. As a place where

someone can learn all about you, your background and experience, and how you can help, you want to drive as much traffic to your website as possible and create an opportunity to *engage* with potential clients, referral sources, and others in your target audience.

Practice area descriptions and attorney profiles, though important, are static pages and rarely tell new stories. Because you want to leverage your website across multiple marketing channels, a blog or newsroom provides the means to share original posts and content that will expand your online presence. According to the 2015 American Bar Association *Legal Technology Survey Report*, 65 percent of law firms indicated they do not maintain a blog, while 26 percent claimed to actively blog. If effective marketing means taking advantage of opportunities your competition ignores, blogging can be a worthwhile activity, as evidenced by another finding from the same survey: 38 percent of lawyers who blog for professional purposes said they received a client directly or through a referral attributable to blogging.

There are lawyers who, quite creatively, use a social network as an anchor; for example, sharing information and engaging with followers via a LinkedIn or Facebook page or a Twitter feed. The risk, however, is that many potential clients are not active or are absent from these social media networks, resulting in the loss of opportunity to engage.

Draw a map

Every healthy marketing plan consists of four essential components: goals, strategy, tactics, and measurement. The absence of one is like a table missing a leg.

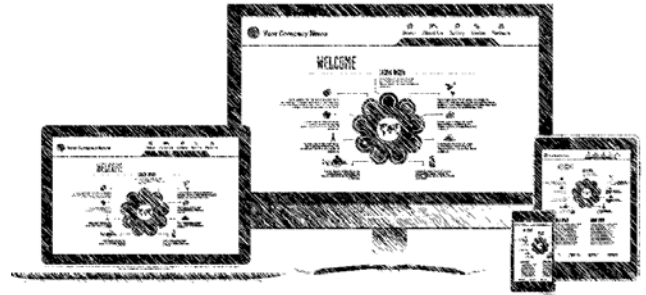
Pretend you are planning a vacation. Your goal may be to explore the sights, visit faraway relatives, or relax on a beach. Your strategy takes into account the time frame, investment, and general preparation necessary to embark on your trip. Your tactics are the steps you must execute, such as air travel, hotel accommodations, clothes to take, and the luggage to pack them in. Along your journey, you measure the success of your plan and ultimately determine the value of the entire endeavor.

Now think about your online marketing plan.

What goals do you want to achieve? Perhaps your overall objective is building awareness and promoting your thought leadership, or maybe you're only looking for a volume of calls and inquiries.

What about your strategy? Your potential clients exhibit distinct behaviors and go about hiring lawyers and addressing legal questions in certain ways, and you must accommodate their mindsets and thought processes.

Which tactics will you employ? Social networks, attorney directories, news portals, and other sites can influence how constituents research and retain a lawyer, and you need to determine which channels will deliver them to you.



FAST FACTS

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How will you measure effectiveness? Quantitative yardsticks such as cost-per-lead, cost-per-client, and overall return on investment are important, but qualitative results can be equally meaningful and should also be weighed.

Select your rigging and your crew

With online marketing, you have an array of tools from which to choose, and the best way to assess your options is to think like your next best client.

For example, in the social media arena, LinkedIn is the most popular and most relied on platform for lawyers and businesspeople. A 2015 study conducted by Greentarget and Zeughauser Group revealed that 68 percent of in-house counsel surveyed indicated they use LinkedIn for professional purposes at least weekly. Even if your practice doesn't involve corporate, commercial, or business representation, there's still a strong chance a prospective client will search for you on LinkedIn, or that your LinkedIn profile (assuming you have one) will appear among the top search results if someone does a Google search for your name.

There are lawyers who, quite creatively, use a social network as an anchor; for example, sharing information and engaging with followers via a LinkedIn or Facebook page or a Twitter feed.

Facebook, by comparison, is arguably more suited to lawyers serving clients with personal legal needs (e.g., criminal defense, family law, estate planning, personal injury), consistent with its mission of empowering people “to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.” Per statistics compiled by Zephoria.com and Statista.com, one of every five web pages seen in the U.S. is on Facebook and viewable by the platform’s 214 million users.

Twitter, Google+, and even Instagram may also have a place in your firm’s online marketing plan depending on how they align with your target audience. Appropriate consideration should also be given to free listings on lawyer directories such as Avvo, Findlaw, Justia, and Zeekbeek, the State Bar of Michigan member directory.

E-mail marketing through services such as Constant Contact and MailChimp is also a vehicle to deliver content to people who may be interested in what you have to say. In addition to creating original newsletter articles and alerts, you can reuse, recycle, and repurpose blog and other content, adding links to drive readers to your website for more information.

Make no mistake: marketing generally, and online marketing specifically, requires an investment. Notwithstanding its client development value, the time devoted to building and maintaining websites and blogs, writing and distributing content through social media and newsletters, and updating professional profiles may be better spent on practicing law. Additionally, the ability to zero in on your target audience through social media advertising and Google AdWords campaigns is compelling, but pay-per-click and pay-per-call rates can vary substantially. Budgeting tools, however, can help you control these fees. Inevitably, lawyers and law firms must weigh the cost of managing activities in-house against outsourcing the work to dedicated writers, content marketers, and social media managers.

Chart a course

As a general observation, lawyers love checklists. Checklists ensure that all the elements of a cause of action or affirmative defense are satisfied. They guarantee that all the necessary clauses and provisions in a contract are included. They guard against malpractice.

An editorial calendar serves the same purpose. It lays out the online marketing tools you’ve chosen; the frequency of your posts, updates, and newsletters as well as who will draft and publish them; and how you will leverage your content across your selected channels. It also prevents scrounging around for topics at the last minute. If you’ve planned your content in advance, you’ll always know which post is next.

That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be spontaneous. The best blogs, for example, balance topical with more “evergreen” content. This is important because more timely posts demonstrate awareness of current events and developments while more general posts showcase your depth of knowledge.

Above all, your editorial calendar should be in a form that makes the most sense for you and your firm. Elaborate Gantt charts may appear to be the best solution, but an Excel spreadsheet, dry erase markers and a whiteboard, or even sticky notes on the wall may become the tools of choice.

Weather the storm

Over the last 15 years, we’ve watched the Internet evolve from Web 1.0 to Web 4.0, and its trajectory continues upward. What the next iteration of the web holds relative to legal marketing is difficult for anyone to accurately predict and nearly impossible for lawyers known for their conservative outlooks.

A carefully configured plan that taps appropriate online marketing channels to promote your practice and your brand will enable you to maintain a consistent effort and approach while also affording you the flexibility to adjust and augment your strategy and tactics as your audience changes and new marketing opportunities emerge. ■



John F. Reed, Esq., is the founder of Rain BDM, a business development and marketing consultancy that helps law firms of all sizes build outstanding client relationships. Working with clients in Michigan and across the country, he trains attorneys in client development and social media. The Rain BDM team provides firms with strategic planning, tactical support, content and comprehensive blog management, and outsourced marketing department services.