

Ring in the New Year with an Internet Marketing Resolution

By JoAnn L. Hathaway and William A. McNeil

Does your law firm have a website? If not, the new year is a perfect time to get started building your Internet presence. If you do have a website, are you getting clients and generating business? There are specific techniques you can use to increase your client base from the web.

Having a well-built website should be a fundamental building block of your law firm business development efforts. Regardless of the size of your firm, you need a well-designed, properly built site so search engines can find you. Fresh content is a must for an effective web presence. Don't think small just because your firm is.

What is Internet marketing? Think of it as any type of Internet communication that leads potential clients to a firm's website and provides information about the firm as a direct result of the firm's efforts to positively influence its image.

All law firms need a marketing plan. Internet marketing should be a major component of the plan and, ideally, one person (staff or consultant) should be empowered to take charge of oversight and implementation.

Search-engine crawlers will visit your site and spider the pages to add to their indexes.

Make it easy for the crawlers to understand your site structure by including a site map XML file. Each page should be described using title tags and keyword/description meta tags, which let the search engines know the relational content of each page on your site.

Identify your potential clients. Chances are they didn't go to law school, so a website full of legalese is unnecessary. Use plain language with keywords related to your areas of practice to make your site memorable and increase search-engine rankings.

Your website is the place to showcase your expertise; credentials, degrees, certifications, peer review ratings, and client testimonials are relevant and give you credibility. Your areas of practice should always be listed and readily apparent. It's also helpful to communicate your familiarity with local court systems.

A video, such as a brief welcome message, gives potential clients a glimpse of you and your world. Sites with videos have dramatically higher click-through rates than those without. A word of caution: if you plan to post videos, take the time to do them right. A poorly orchestrated video is worse than none at all.

Your phone number should be displayed prominently on each page of your website, ideally in more than one place. A toll-free number is best. Phone numbers should be positioned so viewers don't have to scroll

down to find them. A simple e-mail form for prospective clients is recommended for those who don't need immediate responses or those who find phone contact inconvenient.

Adding links to your published articles and hosting a dedicated area for newsletter registration are other good, interactive website interfaces; the latter allows you to collect names to build a database for generating future leads.

An online presence need not be solely through your website. Lawyers and firms can blog; use pay-per-click advertising or advertise on websites; include the firm's name in online directories; issue press releases; and have a presence on Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and YouTube.

Don't underestimate the importance of branding, which involves more than a logo. It encompasses the central theme of the services your firm provides. Branding should most clearly communicate your value proposition to your intended audience in a way that significantly differentiates your firm from others offering the same or similar types of services.

Marketing consists of the processes you employ to present your brand to your targeted audience. Examples include advertising, client development functions, and authoring industry articles. Advertising is a form of marketing that displays a firm's message for a certain period.

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—JoAnn Hathaway and Diane Ebersole,
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Once you have your branding, you can build an Internet marketing and advertising program. Goals might include:

- Connecting with prospective clients before and at the time they are looking for services
- Establishing an identity apart from other firms by way of branding and communicating the value proposition offered
- Ensuring first placement on the list of attorneys to contact for potential engagement

Times have changed, and so has the nature of websites. Gone (hopefully) are website elements associated with Web 1.0, including lack of light-colored backgrounds, outdated clip art images, boring text formatting (one size fits all), homemade pictures, and lots of links. Enter Web 2.0 (closely followed by Web 3.0) with features consisting of bright, tasteful, coloring; floating, as opposed to “boxed-out,” sections; simple and easy-to-understand navigation; and interactive interfaces.

Time is increasingly becoming one of our most precious commodities. If people can't find something quickly on a site, they leave and search another. Information should not be more than three clicks away from the home page, with two clicks being the preference.

Have multiple paths to access information. For example, a firm's web contact form should be prominently displayed on every page. Contact information should be, at a minimum, in the header and footer of the site. Prospective clients should not have to work to find information. Cutting-edge firms are implementing dynamic contact forms that interact with smart phones and can automatically generate retainer agreements and online invoices.

Stand Out in the Crowd

There are several terms for optimizing your website so it is found in the major search engines like Google, Yahoo!, and Bing. Examples include search engine optimization (SEO), search engine marketing,

on-page SEO, link building, organic search, and pay-per-click.

If you have ever tried to hire a web designer, you know there is a wide array of experience and talent from which to choose. Some specialize in cutting-edge design, including the use of graphics like Adobe Flash and video integration. Others focus on SEO and design websites so the major search engines can find them with ease.

The type of designer you choose should be dependent on the goals you've set for your website. If you plan to promote it from traditional print media with a billboard-type site, creative design using the latest technology is important. If your goal is to get more clients, it's paramount that you build your site right from the start so search engines will crawl and rank it appropriately.

Certain platforms for building websites are more search-engine friendly than others. Ask your prospective designer about the platform he or she would use and if it's search-engine friendly. Don't forget to ask for demonstrations and samples of prior designs.

Tips Straight from Google

Google wants your website to be found by potential clients, and, in fact, has published “Google's Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide,” Version 1.1, November 2008. This is a gold mine for web masters, and most of the suggestions are still relevant two years later.

Google recommends that web masters create page titles that are unique and accurate. Title tags can be important, as they typically show up on the first line of Google search results. With that in mind, take your time when creating proper title tags.

A page's description meta tag is important; it gives Google and other search engines a summary of what the page is about. It can't be too long or short. It's important to collaborate with your web master to create an original meta tag for your law firm's website

Google encourages web masters to “improve the structure of your URLs.” A URL (uniform resource locator) is the address of your web page(s) on the World Wide Web, displayed at the top of your web browser, e.g., www.yourwebsite.com/page. Collaborate with your web master to improve your

URL structure to help your users and increase your rankings. For tips on optimizing your site, go to “Google Web Master Central” and download a free copy of the starter guide.

Website quality content directly affects rankings in the major search engines. Competition for legal services on the Internet is fierce. The goal of any major search engine is to provide its users with quality reference sites directly related to the search conducted. If a user types in “Michigan drunk driving attorney,” Google and others will want to return a result that best informs the user about drunk driving. The more quality content you provide on a given topic, the higher you’ll rank. While other factors are involved, take a look at the legal sites that rank well. Most contain page upon page of content on a variety of topics within a particular field of law.

Blogging has become a valuable resource for individuals searching for attorneys, and the major search engines are following suit. There has been a huge increase in traffic with sites that consistently provide quality blog posts for prospective and current clients. Blogging is time consuming and difficult for a busy attorney to maintain, yet it’s one of the easiest ways to increase site traf-

fic and rankings without hiring an SEO programmer or link builder.

Major search engines track the number of links back to your site and use this as one criterion for ranking. It’s important that these are quality links to boost your rankings. Never use link farms or artificially create these links.

The domain name you choose for your site can also influence its rankings. Your law firm may want its name in the domain name; however, an additional domain name can be secured that describes your practice areas and the matters you hope to get from site searches. A good example is www.kalamazoodrunkdriving.com. This domain name is helpful because any time a person searches “Kalamazoo drunk driving,” the domain name will appear prominently in the search results.

Many programs provide analytics to track site traffic and results. Google Analytics is one of them, and it’s free! Your web master should be able to provide robust tracking with graphs, charts, keyword analysis, and the behavior of those who visited your site. This information can help you tailor the content or look and feel of your site to maximize your return on investment.

Websites that target specific areas of law are regarded as niche sites, or microsites, and should be considered as a part of your Internet marketing strategy. Typically, a law firm launches one site and lists all of the different areas of law practiced. With the increase in prospective clients searching for information (and not a specific lawyer), niche websites are successfully generating traffic. For example, potential clients, especially in the area of criminal defense, are looking for information about their crime... not you! Therefore, it might be necessary to launch multiple sites that target different niche areas of the law with a great deal of quality content on each.

Pay-per-click advertising can be a quick way to drive targeted traffic to your site. This differs from an organic search with results usually appearing on the right side of a page, typically with a “sponsored ads” label. Major search engines allow you to place ads and bid on placement when certain searches are performed. Depending on the practice area, cost-per-click varies widely. One click for mesothelioma might cost hundreds of dollars per click, while a search for obscure areas of law could cost pennies.

In conclusion, law firms that understand Internet marketing have a competitive advantage over those who do not. If you plan to make Internet marketing a priority in 2011, it could indeed be a *very* happy new year! ■

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