

Improve your Web site on search engines

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No marketing channel can touch the power of the Internet.

And no channel is as crowded with competitors or can be as intimidating to clients. That is why addressing the issue of visibility — how your Web site is linked to other legal Web sites, how easy is it for clients to find you, and how your firm can improve those connections — should be a critical component of your online client development strategy.

One smart strategy to consider is making changes to your Web site, and to your overall online presence, that boost your rankings with powerful search engines like Google, Yahoo and MSN.

It is called Search Engine Optimization. The goal is to make your Web site more visible and relevant to both search engines and the people who use them to find legal representation. By taking a few basic steps to raise your Web site's visibility on the search engines, your firm will have an excellent opportunity to generate more quality leads and increase the return on your Web investment.

The challenge, of course, is standing out from the crowd. Research shows that most people look at just the first page or two of a search result. So how do search engines compile those lists? Why does Firm A rank highly in a given result, while Firm B struggles in at No. 273?

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It starts with "spiders," software programs that the search engines send out to visit Web pages, collect information, and then use that information to build a searchable index. When a potential client queries, e.g., "Milwaukee Employment Lawyer," the search engine sorts through its vast index for the most relevant, authoritative information related to the request. Search engines frequently adjust the formulas they use to rank Web sites, making their rankings more precise and impeding spam.

Leave the technical fine-tuning to experts who focus on Search Engine Marketing and don't have a law firm to run. Focus on strategies that will improve search engine results. These strategies include:

- Ensuring your Web site's content is fresh and easily consumed by the spiders.
- Choosing words and phrases that target your prospects.
- Increasing the number of relevant inbound links from other legal related Web sites that drive clients to your firm's Web site.

CONTENT

A rule of thumb: What attracts and holds the attention of site visitors will also improve search engine rankings. A search engine's spider looks for fresh information to index. A straightforward, easy to browse design can make a significant difference in your site's search engine ranking. The same slow-loading, overdone graphics and multimedia bells-and-whistles that drive Web users up the wall can also decrease the likelihood of your Web site's pages being highly placed in a search engine results page.

One of the most important factors in search-engine-optimizing your Web site is to intelligently use keywords that promote

your marketing objectives that identify your geographic location and practice areas, and match the words that clients use when they conduct a search.

To use keywords effectively on your site, remember to:

- Put yourself in your client's shoes. Potential clients will not necessarily use legal terms of art when conducting a search. Incorporate layman's terms for your key practice areas. Include "lawyer" and "attorney" and "law firm." Cover your geographic area in all its permutations: city, state, even neighborhood if you're in a big city.

- Keep it readable. Keyword stuffing — repeating key words and phrases over and over — makes for a poor user experience and could get your site flagged by the search engines. Your goal is keyword-rich language that is also natural and readable.

- Own a niche. While the typical search generates thousands (or even millions) of results, most users click the first few links. So it's key to target your specific market niche and location. You are better off, in other words, scoring high in a unique search than chasing the most competitive, generic keywords like "divorce lawyer" or "criminal defense attorney."

Keywords need to be incorporated into the behind-the-scenes programming of your site. Properly written title tags, meta descriptions and alt tags are a few of the key elements that can help keep you at the top of search engine rankings.

Content is king; therefore, if you work with a Web site provider, it is critical that they know the legal industry and how to write for it, and understand how search engines evaluate and rank Web sites.

INBOUND LINKS

Another factor influencing search-engine rankings are the inbound links to your Web address from other Web sites. With inbound links, quality is much more important than quantity. Relevant links from other law firms, legal information Web sites and bar associations, etc., influence your Web site's results in the search engines. It is similar to a frequently cited legal case. A case is more important when other rulings reference it, particularly when they are directly on topic. In the same way, when authoritative Web sites link to your site, it raises your site's credibility. However, inbound links should be considered for the traffic they will generate and never for any potential search engine result lift they might provide.

ONGOING PROCESS

Search engine optimization is a straightforward, common-sense process, but it's important to keep at it — to analyze your site's traffic and conversion rate, change and adjust your site's content as your goals and the legal issues facing your clients change.

Publish new content on your site when necessary. If you outsource your online marketing, look for a provider who can assist you for the long-term — from traffic analysis, content writing and design, to the nuts-and-bolts of site management, it is important to partner with an experienced company that fully understands strategic Internet marketing for law firms. Search Engine Optimization is a critical component in utilizing the Internet to its fullest potential. By optimizing your firm's Web presence you will be able to focus more on quality client matters and strengthen existing client relationships.

DO GOOD

Pro Bono Opportunities for Attorneys

The **Do Good** column is designed to highlight the myriad pro bono opportunities that are available for attorneys from a variety of practice areas. We want to shine a light on the need for practitioners who will take up some of those cases.

This is a joint project that we produce with the help of groups and agencies such as Legal Action of Wisconsin and the Dane County Delivery of Legal Services Committee. We invite additional groups with pro bono opportunities to contact us about participating in this project, as well.

Tony Anderson, Editor, 414.276.0273, Ext. 123

DCBA DELIVERY OF LEGAL SERVICES

Midwest Environmental Advocates, located in Madison, is the first and only non-profit environmental law center in Wisconsin. MEA provides legal and technical support to grassroots groups that are working for environmental justice in the Western Great Lakes region. MEA combines litigation and community organizing to effect environmental justice.

Founded in 1999 by UC-Berkeley Law School graduate Melissa Scanlan,

MEA works with local governments and citizen groups in Wisconsin to protect the environment. MEA has recently expanded by adding one new staff attorney and one of counsel attorney and an office manager. MEA also utilizes an Advocacy Network of pro bono attorneys to maximize the efficacy of their organization.

MEA'S ADVOCACY NETWORK

The Advocacy Network is comprised of attorneys and others who have agreed to render free or reduced fee services to

groups working to protect the environment. This service can range from an hour-long commitment to fully litigating a case in federal court. Midwest Environmental Advocates serves as a clearinghouse to screen potential cases and provide referrals to lawyers who are part of the Advocacy Network. MEA provides the framework to link lawyers with groups and individuals who would not otherwise be able to afford access to the legal system. The Advocacy Network is one way to use your legal skills to protect the environment while fulfilling your public service responsibilities.

Joining the Advocacy Network is a powerful step in the direction of ensuring environmental justice for all!

To join the Advocacy Network, send an email to bdenzin@midwestadvocates.org with your name, profession, expertise, address, phone number and email, or call MEW at 608-251-5047. MEA will contact you for further information to include in the Advocacy Network.

OTHER MEA VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

In the next year, MEA will be conducting a major donor campaign, starting a planned giving program, and coordinating a Wisconsin for Environmental Justice Alliance. MEW would welcome assistance from volunteer attorneys who have an estate planning background who would have an interest in helping MEA pursue its major donor campaign or who would like to actively participate in planning and organizing the new Alliance.

To volunteer for those opportunities, send an email to plyfoung@midwestadvocates.org or you can call Pacyinz Lyfoung, MEA Managing Director, at 608-251-5047 ext. 4.

Finally, MEA's work relies on the support of individuals who share the same vision and believe in its mission of environmental justice. Donations are always welcome.

For more information, please check the MEA Web site at www.midwestadvocates.org. You can also join their email list-serve, to receive bi-monthly updates on current work and environmental issues.