

From the Great Jakes Blog

Is SEO snake oil? Here's the truth about search engine optimization for law firm websites.



By Dion Algeri, Founder
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This post was inspired by a raucous conversation we had with some CMOs over dinner at the LMA conference in Orlando. Thanks guys!

Here's the simple truth: Search engine optimization (SEO) is among the most over-hyped marketing tactics in the legal industry. *It may even be more hyped than social media.*

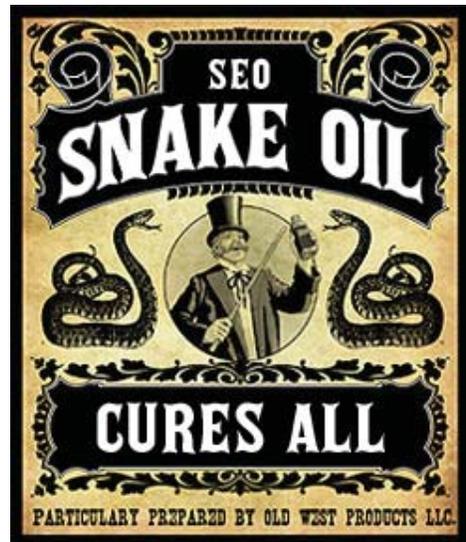
Law firms want to believe in the magic of SEO — and marketing companies are more than happy to sell it. Yet, few people truly understand how it can bring new business through the door.

Before I elaborate, it's important to know that organic SEO is a core competency of my firm. We've been doing it for a decade and have had great success getting our clients' sites to the top of the Google results page. Over the years, we've also learned that top Google rankings, alone, seldom lead to more clients.

The big misconception

When most marketers think of SEO, they imagine that it works something like this:

1. A prospective client Googles, say, "bankruptcy lawyer in Los Angeles".
2. That person lands on the Bankruptcy section of your website and reads your marketing text.
3. With a little luck, they contact you and you get a new customer.



While this is how people think SEO should work – it seldom, if ever, works like this for corporate law firms. Why? Because the 3-step path above describes a consumer purchasing experience. This 3-step model might work for “refrigerator magnets” or “Red Sox t-shirts”, but it fails for corporate law firms. Companies just don’t buy legal services in the same way consumers buy toasters.

***An aside:** Back before we specialized in serving law firms, my company was ranked highly on Google for the term “B2B website design”. We were ranked #1 or #2 for many, many years. It drove lots of traffic to our website. And our phone would occasionally ring with inquiries. However, it didn’t result in a single new client. In most cases, the callers were small, unsophisticated businesses with tiny budgets — and we weren’t interested in working with them.*

So, how can SEO work for law firms?

SEO can definitely help law firms attract new clients. However, the model is longer and more circuitous than the 3-step consumer buying path described above. Consider this path:

1. A prospective client Googles a highly specific search phrase, such as “impact of 2010 financial reform act on credit unions”.
2. That person lands on an article or blog post you’ve written on that exact subject.
3. They read your piece and are impressed with your insight.
4. They surf your website and notice that you specialize in the exact legal micro-niche that concerns them most.
5. They sign up for your newsletter and subscribe to your blog.
6. Over the next few years, they follow your blog and read your newsletter. Perhaps they also hear you speak at a conference. The more they hear from you, the more respect they have for your legal insights.
7. They hire you when a need arises.

Here’s what it boils down to: SEO is no marketing shortcut. For SEO to be successful, you’ve got to think of SEO as simply one more means of getting your thought leadership work (articles, blog posts, case studies, videos, etc.) in front of prospective clients. In other words, it’s just another way to help build your reputation as an expert.

So, if you want to win clients through SEO, write and create more (and better) content. And then perform some basic optimization of articles and blog posts. It's that simple.