

Law Practice Marketing: Practical Experience From the Field

I have heard from a number of new attorneys who have questions about how to market themselves. I thought I would share some thoughts about this issue, based on my own professional experience as a web developer, entrepreneur, and now solo practitioner.

First Things First - Get a Domain Name

You will need to pay to register a domain name, like faithatlaw.com, with an internet registrar, such as Network Solutions. This is required in order for all the other computers on the internet (well over a billion) to be able to find your site's location on the network server that will hold your web site's files and data. Network Solutions was the original registrar back in the bad old days, but today there are a number of registrars that you can work with (try searching with google to find others). Be sure to pick one that looks like they are going to be around for a while (and that may not be the guy that registers domain names for \$10 for 1,000 years).

Your domain name should make sense based on the name of your practice, your specialty, and should ideally be short. Don't try to use a famous trademark as your domain name or you will get in trouble! Don't pick a name that is three hundred characters long, either. And your name should usually end in .com. There are other possible domains, like .biz or .tv, but these have really not caught on for the average internet user looking for your site.

Web Site Hosting

Your web site has to physically be located as a set of files on a server that is connected to the public internet. You will generally have to pay someone who is in the business of hosting sites for this service, unless you have a T1 connection at home with a static IP address and your service contract allows you to host sites. There are a lot of businesses that offer web site hosting. You may want to find a hosting company that will support multiple web languages, backend databases, blogging, and other features, even if you don't need that right away.

Content of Your Web Site

Your web site should be straight forward for your users to get around, and should have a basic navigation scheme that highlights your skills, services, and a way for users to reach you. Think of what you would put on a brochure that you would mail to prospective clients and put that on your site.

Be careful about the graphics or other art that you place on your site. Using other people's art without a license or express right can get you into trouble, especially if your site gets a lot of traffic. There are a number of services that you can purchase that will allow you to create a web site from a template (this service is often wrapped up in the hosting of the finished web site itself). Be sure to read the contract before you sign up for the service.

Meta Tags

Meta tags are a special hidden indexing tool that helps internet search engines like yahoo and google to properly index the content of your site. These are placed in the header section of each web document, and are basically a list of the words that describe the content of your site, like "attorney," "copyright infringement," "tenant and landlord," "intellectual property" and so on.

You may or may not have the ability to add this to the header of the documents that you post, but check with your service provider or hosting company about editing these tags.

Blogging and Dynamic Content

Once you have your site up on the internet, you need to make a note on your calendar to update the content of your site on a regular basis. And by regular, I do not mean once every thirteen years. You should have a section of your site for news, and you should post updates to this section on things that are going on with your firm. You can also create an online blog, like this one, and post news and updates to it. This is good for several reasons. One, the search engines stop by your site regularly and they see what is on the site. New content will get indexed by them, which helps to increase the chances that someone searching for you will find your web site. Two, people that actually do come to your site will think you actually still exist and are actively working as an attorney. And three, the more content you have overall, the more established you will appear to others that might be researching you, including other attorneys, especially if you can demonstrate some expertise in your area of the law.

Online Adverts

Google, Yahoo, and MSN probably make up 95% of all the searching of the internet today, with Google making up nearly 60% all by themselves. All three of these allow you to pay for advertising, which basically helps to make sure that, based on the keyword search, your web site will show up towards the top of the search results. Generally speaking, this is the entire web search game. If your site is indexed but consistently appears as search result 624,691,504 out of 624,691,505 results, no one will ever find your site via a search engine. That makes the search engine pretty much useless to advertise your site, and by extension, makes your web site kind of useless (I mean, people will find your web site if you meet them in person and give them your business card with your web address on it, but how many people can you meet in person to do that?).

Of the three, I would recommend starting with google. The cost to run an ad with keywords is generally minimal to start, and you only pay if someone clicks on your ad and comes to your site. Now, not many of the clickers will become customers, but you don't need a million customers to start. In fact, you may only need just one.

Unlike google, in order to get yahoo to pay attention to your site, you have to wait for them to get around to index your web pages. You can submit your site for free, but that just means that they will eventually index your pages. So, if you are in a hurry, you can pay \$49 a year to yahoo

and they will index your site within about a week, and come back and visit your site on a regular basis.

In addition, you can pay for search marketing on yahoo, which is similar to how google's advertising works - you pay per click and for high placement of your advertisement in search results, based on certain keywords that you configure when you create your ad. One key difference: you have to deposit a minimum amount of money into your yahoo advertising account with a credit card to get started (this is also true for MSN advertising).

It is probably no wonder that google has a larger share of the search market than yahoo today - google indexes automatically and more quickly (my web site showed up in search results in google a few days after I posted content, where yahoo came within a week of paying for the privilege of having their spider index the site). But advertising on both is a safe hedge, given that the two are the dominant search engines on the internet today.

You can also help the automated systems that index your web content by having a robots.txt file in the root of your web site. This file will tell the automated systems (spiders) to ignore certain subdirectories of your site (for example, archived content). My robots.txt file looks like this:

```
User-agent: *  
Disallow: /aspnet_client/  
Disallow: /code/
```

Statistics

Some web site hosting companies will provide you with statistics on your web site's utilization. These stats are very helpful as you begin to develop your site and want to measure how successful your efforts have been, because you can compare site activity before and after you begin advertising in various places. Also, most web servers will allow you to collect referer data, which you can use to see how people get to your site, such as a search engine or other web site address that has a link to your site.

So, for example, if you are advertising on google, google will tell you how many times someone clicked on your ad in a given period. You can then query your web site itself to see how many people used google to search for you and what search terms they used to find your site. If your google ad received two clicks in a month, but people got to your web site via a google search 60 times, you might need to change your ad on google, or change the keywords that you are advertising to match how people got to your web site.

Or, if you are advertising on yahoo, but all of your referers are from MSN or AOL, you might stop advertising on yahoo and start advertising on one of the other search providers or services.

I've been using Google Analytics on my site to help me keep track of web traffic. Google Analytics is a free service from google. You are required to add some java script into the header

of your web pages in order to report usage to the database maintained by google. I have also used other software that can analyze the local web logs kept daily by IIS.

Market From Multiple Angles

Marketing is all about advertising in multiple ways at the same time. So, if you are considering building a web site and advertising from it or about it, also think about other places you can get the web address in front of your prospective customers. Think about what's cost-effective for you, especially if you are just starting out as an attorney. Ads in a major newspaper that you run weekly for a year are going to cost thousands of dollars, and it is very hard to measure what impact these ads are having on those that contact you. But, you can put your web address on your business cards, stationery, on other materials that you handout to prospective clients, perhaps on direct mailings that you send to prospective customers, and as a tattoo on your forehead (that will go over well in court!).

Marketing from multiple angles also means trying search advertising on multiple search engines. At present, google has the majority of search traffic on the internet, and also is probably the quickest to index site content.

More Content = More Visitors

One of the essential rules of web site design is that the more content on your site, the more chances you have of being indexed against keywords that internet users may be using to search. Therefore, you increase the number of people that visit your site when you have more indexed content, which increases the chances of picking up a new client through the site or impressing one of your colleagues with your knowledge such that they refer you a prospective customer or two.

Of course, adding content is a time-intensive kind of thing, even if you write blog articles day and night. One of the good things about google and yahoo is that the search engines will come back and visit your site for new content on a regular basis (google checks my site more than once per week, and you can pay for priority indexing by yahoo so they visit your site at least weekly for content changes and indexing).

Pushing Out Newsletters

Pushing out newsletters to subscribers, with links to return users to your site that receive and wish to read the newsletter's full content also helps to drive users to your site (and adds content directly to your site for the hungry search engines). Over time, I definitely see spikes in activity on my site around the times that I send out newsletters via email to subscribers.

Blogging is also a helpful way to put more content out on your site, and if you are a Wordpress user, you can plug your site statistics directly into Google Analytics (which is a free service offered by google to help you keep track of your visitors) with a plugin for Wordpress. Blogging is more passive, as you cannot directly push out new content by email to your subscribers.

However, you can cross post your blog contents to a facebook page using the Notes feature of the facebook site. LinkedIn also has this functionality. This gives you the ability to place your content into multiple locations, increasing your content's exposure. And facebook allows you to create a facebook page for your practice, which you can then market to develop a fan base. Fans automatically receive updates that you post on the page, and with your blog, your new blog posts can be pushed out to your fans (again by integrating through the Notes function).

Watch What Keywords Bring Users to Your Site

Google's Analytics keeps track (for the web site pages that you embed the javascript needed to collect data on site visitors) of the keywords that bring users to your web site. These keyword statistics help to determine what brought a user to the site, and may lead you to change your site content to either encourage or discourage the kinds of visitors that are reaching your site. For example, I had written a newsletter about the new Massachusetts law that is aimed at protecting consumer data collected by businesses in that state. (*See* 201 CMR § 17.00). A number of users have found my site because of this newsletter, particularly in their searches by citation to the statute itself.

On the other hand, some users looking for a bankruptcy or divorce attorney have also landed on my web site, which suggests that my site has been indexed under overly general keywords related to law, or the advertisements that I have running on yahoo or google (if the source of some of these visitors) are not specific enough in their focus (again, based on their keywords). For example, my web site does show up in the third page of search results when searching with google for "disaster recovery table top exercise," but I would be happier if my site was closer to the first page of results.

Related to this are the web sites that refer visitors to the web site. Interestingly, facebook is my top referring web site, followed by linkedin (where I have a professional profile), and then some web sites that I don't recognize but apparently have indexed my site into their search results for one reason or another. Same question of whether to encourage or discourage such links based on the content of your own site.

Twitter and Tweeting

So far, I haven't done much tweeting out in the world of twitter. I guess as an attorney, 140 characters is just too restrictive. Perhaps if I start writing haikus, twitter would be the place to publish them! I see that Iran's election results are being tracked by twitterers in Iran, so maybe if I was at a live event like Apple's annual trade show or another large meeting, I'd be more prone to twitter away (which I can do from my iPhone if I were so inclined). Wordpress does support integration with twitter via a plugin, so if you want to be able to put your tweets into a digest form and load them automatically to your blog, you can. Time will tell if twitter ends up being useful to market a law firm.

Most Importantly...

TIMOTHY S. FAITH

Attorney At Law

Document hosted at JDSUPRA™

<http://www.jdsupra.com/post/documentViewer.aspx?fid=32df191e-56a9-4fe1-a593-bc8398e908cc>

News and Blog

Keep working at it and don't be afraid to try new things. Google Analytics (or a similar web tracking software package that you can use on your web site logs) will help you to figure out why people come to your site and what they spend time looking at on it. And be patient - online marketing is a fair amount like fishing. Some days you come home with nothing, and other days, you find a place pre-stocked with your favorite fish and you come home fat and happy!