

Competing With A Larger Firm: How the Web Levels the Playing Field

By [Sharon Berman](#)

Until recently, professional service firms of different sizes marketed on an uneven playing field. Larger firms held the high ground and had the advantage. Fortunately, the Web has lowered the barriers to entry so that smaller firms can now promote their services as successfully as large brand-name firms. For a relatively low investment, smaller firms can expand their presence and reach desirable clients as effectively as those that have larger wallets. Seizing turf is as simple as taking advantage of the tools the Web has to offer, but it does take a willingness to learn the tools and apply them.

It's Not the Money. When it comes to marketing, smaller firms have traditionally believed that money is what distinguishes them from their larger counterparts, but that's not always the case. Rather, the difference lies in a firm's vision, its ability to recognize opportunities and seize market share, and its marketing focus. In today's world, dollars don't have to be a roadblock to communicating that you're a firm that has talent and substance.

Just because a firm can afford an in-house marketing director or department does not mean it has the advantage. Every marketing department in the country is stretched to the limit trying to cover too many bases. If you're a boutique firm with a niche, you may even have an edge because your big-firm colleague may not get attention from the marketing department and doesn't have the control you have to tailor and target market-vehicles.



Maximize Your Website. Your primary tool when competing with larger firms is your website. You do not need to have all of the latest bells and whistles, but you do need a classy, clean, contemporary site. Its content has to sell your firm by positioning you as an expert in your discipline and demonstrating to prospective clients that they have come to the right place.

Having as compelling and informative a website as a large competitor doesn't need to eat up all your profits, but you do need to make an investment. Take time to research website designers who can create a site for you that depicts your firm's energy and leadership. For example, if you or your partners speak at conferences or tradeshows, have a section on your site showing that. You can also have a news section to post articles about speaking engagements, new hires, promotions, or sponsorships. Then distribute those articles via other social media outlets, such as your blog or Twitter. A continuing stream of news and information underscores the fact that you are active and take a leadership role.

High Tech, Low Cost. For little to no money, firms can take advantage of several online tools and tactics that enhance their standings as thought leaders and improve their chances of being found by prospects.

Search engine optimization: Search engine optimization (SEO) is an equal-opportunity marketing tactic that puts small and large firms on a level footing. With organic SEO, through which you optimize your website's ranking in search engine results through your site's content, meta-data, in-bound links, and other techniques, you can generate leads from qualified prospects. Now is the time for professional services firms to act while many behemoth firms are still pooh-poohing SEO. They claim their clients don't search for their type of service online. They're wrong. Many decision-makers at all levels do this, and many more will.

SEO takes expertise, patience, and focus, but here again, the world is flat. If you have someone in-house who has the interest and bent to optimize your website, that person can get the ball rolling. However, SEO is its own art and science, so consider engaging a professional. You can optimize your website as competently as any larger firm without having to spend a lot of money.

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Competing With A Larger Firm *(continued)*

Sponsored search engine results: Sponsored search engine results, often through pay-per-click (PPC) advertising programs, also offer equal marketing opportunity. In this model, you obtain top rankings by bidding on the search terms that your prospective clients may use to find you. You pay only if someone clicks on your ad and goes through to your website (a click-through). While you might need a larger budget in some highly competitive areas (e.g., personal injury law), there are ways to narrow this down so that you compete on very specific terms, such as "track engineering" as opposed to "civil engineering." The field is still wide open in many niche disciplines where you can capture leads with a modest investment.

Video and audio: Video is another marketing avenue rife with opportunity. By adding video to your website, not only will it differentiate your firm, but it will also contribute to higher search engine rankings. With current technology, anyone can create and post high-quality videos. If you prefer to work with a video professional, the cost is not prohibitive. The same ease and simplicity applies to audio recording. Using free software, you can record and edit your own MP3 files and make them available for download from your website.

Social networking websites: LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and a myriad of other social networking sites have also leveled the playing field for communicating with your target markets. You and your colleagues should have profiles on one or more of these sites. Use them to establish your thought leadership and build relationships with clients.

Get Organized to Communicate. Email is a low-cost means of communicating regularly with your clients and prospects, but it requires an up-to-date database or mailing list. Here again, the hurdles for a large firm can be greater than those for a small one. At a large firm, creating a targeted mailing list and coding it by market is like trying to corral an octopus. While it may appear no less daunting to a small firm, it's a task you can get your arms around. Then, once you have it up and running, maintaining it takes minimal time.

Your hard-copy marketing materials can also be on par with those of your larger brethren. Conveying a professional image does not require expensive, four-color glossy brochures. With the quality of in-house color printing today, inexpensive binding machines, and other sophisticated hardware and software, you can create en-

viable and flexible marketing materials that make you look like a larger firm.

If you don't have the budget now to revamp your website or create polished collateral, keep in mind that the shelf life of websites and materials is about two years. Before you turn around it will be time for a revision, so do your best for the time being and don't wait for perfection. What you create now will have a significant positive impact on your ability to bring in business. Besides, grappling with the challenges of developing your materials and online presence today will make creating the next version easier—you'll have a foundation and a better idea of what worked.

Play to Win. Does all of the above take money? Yes, but you can be effective within a modest budget and can get a large bang for your buck. Whatever you do, remember, it has to convey a professional image. Call in professionals—marketers, writers, designers, SEO experts, etc.—as you need them.

More important than money, the marketing measures discussed above require commitment, attention to detail, and follow-through, which are independent of firm size and budget. The playing field is level, so go play ball. ■

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