

# LegalWEB2.0

## Optimizing Your Online Shingle: On-Page and Off-Page Best Practices

**ROBERT AMBROGI AND STEVE MATTHEWS** | Lawyers and their firms increasingly understand that participating in social networks and other online forums is an expected element of business development today. That does not, however, mean that the firm's website takes a backseat. On the contrary, site optimization and online participation are intimately connected.

Done well, search engine optimization (SEO) programs are about getting your firm's website properties in proper order, ensuring that when lawyers do participate online that the "sales chain" is not broken. Remember, the very last place most new web-based contacts visit before picking up the phone or emailing you continues to be your website—a statement that includes blogs and social media venues, where it's usually bad form to deliver sales messages, anyway.

Your website, then, is your ultimate online shingle. Think of it as the hub of everything else you do online. You want to reach out and engage in a variety of online networks

and use those other engagements to attract people back to your site.

At the same time, though, the soft costs of online participation are an enormous investment for lawyers, and if the firm website doesn't back up those efforts, lawyers who participate online aren't maximizing their time investment and the full impact on business generation will never be known. So here are some of the best practices to employ in a law firm SEO program that will help you get the most from all your other online efforts. Note that the following begins from the premise that your firm has done the proper keyword research to identify the word and phrases that will best attract your target audience—so if that hasn't yet been done, make that your first step. Then read on.

### On-Page Optimization Factors

Search ranking factors are often broken down into two parts: on-page factors

such as coding and off-page factors such as link popularity. On-page factors are must-be-done items, since without them, most sites have very little chance for any kind of ranking success. Here's an overview of primary to-dos.

**Unique title tags.** Within the source code of every web page is the "title tag," a spot to specify that page's title. Many firms today rely on a content management system (CMS) to automatically generate these titles based on page content. However, while that's an improvement over the days of hand-coded sites where title tags were often incomplete or absent, customized title tags help generate higher rankings, allowing for more keyword combinations than the typical CMS default titles.

For SEO purposes, the title tag is an opportunity to tell the search engine exactly what the page is about. Each title tag should include the firm's brand, a few keywords describing the page's content and geographic terms—but most important, every page of your site should have a title tag that is unique and never replicated. Here is a sample:

Smithson LLP: Alabama trusted tax attorneys | Lawyers serving Birmingham, Montgomery, AL

Note the variety of phrase combinations created between the geographic terms and the words "lawyer" and "attorney." Also note how the firm

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name is placed at the beginning of the tag's text, the most valuable location within the tag's structure. Firms are well advised to keep this order in tact, so as not to sacrifice the firm name for subject-oriented searches. Remember that your website must back up all your other marketing initiatives. And because your title tag is also the clickable text displayed in your Google record, keeping the firm name up front makes your entries distinguishable and looks more professional.

**Alt text coding for images.** On a related note, every image on your site—logos, photos and the like—should have an “alt text” attribute specified. This is a textual description of the image that serves two important functions: It helps the search engine understand what the image is and replaces any images that should happen not to load properly.

**Concise meta descriptions.** The Internet houses a surplus of outdated information with respect to the use of meta tags and their impact on search rankings. Meta description tags and meta keywords tags are, in a nutshell, HTML codes inserted in page headers that contain brief information about the page's contents. Firms should include both types of tags in their web pages, but with reduced expectations compared to years past because the search engines have deemphasized their importance.

Bing and a few other search engines still give the *meta keywords* tag a depreciated weight, but Google has stated publicly it gives the meta keywords tag zero weight. The *meta description* tag still delivers a marginal impact (perhaps 1 to 3 ranking spots), but nothing close to the impact of a well-considered title tag.

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### Simple keyword-driven URL structures.

Website URL addresses are another opportunity to provide subject clarity to search engines and, at the same time, simplify site navigation for human visitors. A best practice here is to forgo, or remove, URLs that are nondescript, that include a question mark, or that embed any kind of database field. Instead, try to use URLs that include relevant keywords, that match the most plausible search order, and that have terms separated by dashes. Even if it's not feasible to implement this structure site-wide, key landing pages must be addressed—meaning your professional bios and practice area pages.

As an example, look at this clumsy lawyer profile URL:

```
http://firmwebsite.com/professionals/  
professionalbio.asp?profid=  
4&tmpid=3433
```

Now compare it with this one, which is more of a best-practice URL structure:

```
http://firmwebsite.com/attorneys/jim-smith
```

**Content segmentation.** Be cautious of addressing too many topics on any one web page, especially practice area pages. If you need to scroll down off the screen to read a page, it's probably too long. A web page is not a legal brief, so keep it concise and focused. Law firms can avoid lengthy practice descriptions by creating dedicated and more detailed landing pages for their service lines. These service pages can be subordinate to the parent practice page and, by isolating the topics, the firm will deliver a wider footprint with more focus on specific subjects.

**Content users can quickly scan.** Usability studies find that once a page loads, we

have under three seconds to capture users' interest before they click the Back button on their browser. Usability tests also indicate that excessively large and unbroken text blocks are virtual landmines. The lesson in this: Before site users even read your message, they decide whether to invest their attention in it. Content that is easily scanned sells users on making that time investment. Consequently, firm websites should be drafted in shorter text blocks, use more section headers and incorporate bulleted and numbered lists.

**Descriptive titling.** Using descriptive titles is key to being found online and maximizing long-term exposure for your body of work. While ignoring keyword research during the text-drafting process can be smart and often creates a more genuine message, *don't* ignore keywords when you craft titles. Use descriptive terms and be aware of the preferred keyword order when it comes to titling substantive articles, blogs, micro-sites, new services and practice groups.

**Natural language.** Some SEO professionals will recommend keyword-infused content, or using keyword density tools looking for "the perfect mix" of language to attract search engines. Frankly, the end product is toxic, so stay away from these tools! SEO is best placed before and after the process of drafting a site's contents—*before* so the writer focuses on the audience's preferred use of language, and *after* to ensure the page's title, URL structure, descriptive tagging and coding are properly aligned with the drafted content.

As important as SEO is, it's equally important not to get so hung up on it that you abandon good writing. Your website is your interface with the public. In appearance, theme and

voice, it should convey who you are as a professional—not present you as a well-oiled marketing machine.

### Off-Page Optimization Factors

The off-page factor of links is perhaps the single most differentiating factor for ranking well. Trusted domain status cannot be achieved without these links, which are measured in both quantity and quality, so we'll make that our focus here.

**Incoming links.** Otherwise known as link popularity, search engines value both the number of incoming links and the diversity of those links' sources. As an example, a site with 10 links coming from 10 different sites is better off than a site with 10 links coming from a single domain.

Generally speaking, the more links you have coming into your site, the better your site will rank in search engine results. But knowing that, you also must recognize that all links are not created equal. Obtaining links from a few high-quality, authoritative sites can be worth more than thousands of links from low-quality sites. To achieve that, however, it's imperative to consistently add fresh, high-quality content that is indicative of the firm's expertise and that explicitly uses the language targeted by the firm, both tactfully and naturally. Firm content must be inherently link-worthy—the sort of content that other good sites will want to link to. Without this constant flow of new links, domain trust in the search engines is greatly reduced.

**Contextual (internal) linking.** Another best practice is to incorporate linking between related pages within the various sections of the firm's website, often referred to as internal linking or internal link architecture. The benefits to these

## Want to Build Some Link Love? If You Do Nothing Else, Start a Blog

Simply put, a website is the beginning of your online marketing, but by no means the end. It's your job is to get potential clients interested enough that they will want to visit your firm site. And some believe there is no single step more effective you can take in that regard than to start a blog. A blog costs nothing to launch other than your time, but it can rapidly deliver multiple benefits, including these:

- Dramatically boost your search engine rankings
- Enable you to deliver your message to a wide audience through RSS syndication
- Enable you to reach an ever-wider audience through the viral effect of social media
- Establish you as an expert in your field of law
- Raise your profile and name recognition

- Create opportunities to network and collaborate

- Get you quoted in the press

Overall, a blog can catapult you to the front page of search engine results, which means that you are more likely to be found by potential clients, potential referral sources and news reporters.

Why do search engines like blogs so much? A primary reason is that search engines rank a site's importance, at least in part, by the number and quality of incoming links—and blogs excel at attracting incoming links from reputable sources because of a blog's viral nature. It works like this:

When you post something noteworthy on your blog, another blogger might pick it up and mention it. That second blogger's post might get picked up by yet another blogger. Meanwhile, another of your readers might tweet about your post on Twitter. Someone

else might retweet that. Those posts, re-posts, tweets and retweets all create links to your blog and attract new readers to your blog. Those new readers, themselves, might also blog or tweet or link to you.

All of this snowballs so that, over time, your blog builds readerships and incoming links. A search engine reads all this link love as a sign of your blog's importance and pushes it up in the rankings. Search engines also like fresh content and a blog is a content-generating machine. Well, actually, you have to generate the content, but blogging is the spur that gets you to do that.

The key to the success of a blog is you and the knowledge and insight you bring to bear on your topic. So share what you know. Be generous with your knowledge. Readers will be attracted to that and traffic to your blog will grow. **LP**

contextual links are numerous—they help site visitors quickly navigate to relevant content; they help evenly distribute the link value, or PageRank, across a site; and they increase the depth (i.e., number of pages indexed) of Google's crawl. Some easy ways to increase contextual linking include:

- Linking names of practice group members to their bio pages
- Linking practice areas listed on a lawyer's bio page to the respective practice area pages
- Linking publication authors to their profiles or service area pages
- Linking between firm news items and the lawyer bios or service areas to which the news pertains
- Linking between the firm's awards listing page and the corresponding news announcements

**Local search tactics.** Implementing strategies to help ensure that your site will be found in local searches is now one of the best ways to stand out in search engines. The top tactic here is getting a Google Places listing and setting it up so that it replicates the key contact information and primary services areas on your firm's site. Also, while there are a number of other factors in local search optimization, being listed in as many local directories as possible will corroborate your site's authenticity and support your Google Places ranking. These types of corroborative listings can include legal-specific directories like Avvo, Justia and Martindale-Hubbell as well as consumer-directed local search sources such as Yahoo Local, DexKnows, Citysearch, YellowPages.com and Yelp.

(For more on this topic, see "Claiming Your Spot on Google Places" in *Law Practice's* May/June issue.)

### How to Gauge Quality Links

As previously pointed out, your site must have incoming links to rank well—but may incorrectly assume that all links are measured equally. SEO professionals will refer to "quality links"; so how exactly do you gauge quality? And what type of links should firms be targeting? The following guidelines will help support that decision process.

**Sites with similar subjects.** One-way links or reciprocal links from sites with content that's topically related to yours is considered a key to visibility. For example, two blogs covering the same area and linking back and forth

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are considered more authentic and receive more weight than links between sites with no common subject. This effect is even more evident for new domains, which offer little else for Google to measure trust-wise. Consequently, link exchanges with other sites need to be carefully vetted up front.

**Sites with high PageRanks.** In Google, a PageRank (PR) is a percentile-based measure of link popularity. The scale runs from PR1 through PR10, with a PR1 representing the 10th, or bottom, percentile. Using Google Toolbar, you can activate the green bar display to see the PR of each page. Linking relationships with sites that have a PR0 or a PR1 should be carefully evaluated for potential merit (or avoided). Otherwise, the higher the number, the better.

**Sites without a history of prior linking.** Links from trusted but previously unconnected networks receive substantial weight in rankings. That means a new link from a quality site—an industry magazine, for example—that has never linked to your site in the past can deliver a big search ranking improvement.

**Sites ranked highly in similar target keyword searches.** This refers to sites listed in the top 10 or 20 results for searches that use the same keywords that your firm targets. Even ignoring direct competitors, the top 20 results often present some of the best new linking opportunities.

**Sites that are geographically similar to yours.** Google knows where every website is located and where each search is conducted from, and it tries to match sites and searchers geographically

through a process called geotargeting. So one of the strongest link-building tactics for local rankings is to acquire local-based links. A good idea here is to think about your firm's community participation and the logical links that result. You might link with the local Rotary club or chamber of commerce site, regional business and association directories, and education institutions (especially if any of your lawyers work there as adjunct faculty).

**Fresh links.** Links are most valuable when they are either very new or very old. Links coming into your site are given the most weight when they are under a month old or when they have aged for years. You can't create an aged link out of nowhere, of course—but you can control the flow of new links, either directly from other firm-owned web properties (blogs, for example) or by creating fresh link-worthy content inspiring others to link to you.

**A note about "no-follow" links.** Back in January 2005, Google introduced the "no-follow" attribute for links. This was done so that Google's indexing spiders would ignore hyperlinks coming from within blog comments, in an effort to reduce webspam on blogs. According to Google, "No-follow provides a way for webmasters to tell search engines 'Don't follow links on this page' or 'Don't follow this specific link'—and more importantly, as Google has put it, "those links won't get any credit when we rank websites in our search results." This attribute's original intent quickly spread beyond removing link value for blog comments and it's now used on today's most popular social networks—Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter—where every individual outbound link has the no-follow attribute affixed.

However, the fact that social networks have effectively become "link black holes" for purposes of boosting site rankings is not the point. What is important is that (1) firms recognize that social media participation is not a direct means to boosting Google rankings, and (2) when building links into their websites, firms should be cognizant of whether those links are actually passing the value test. Ultimately, at least in the case of social networks, the connections generated provide the true value and—in addition to all the other marketing-oriented benefits—make participation a critical component in the firm's overall link-building efforts.

## The Final Word in SEO: Aim for Quality Content

Now that we've laid out these guidelines, we're tempted to tell you to forget them all. In the end, what you most need to remember about optimizing your firm's website is that—above all else—you need to provide quality content in a simple, user-friendly design. If your site is well written and effectively communicates who you are and what your practice is about, the search engines will find you. So don't get hung up on SEO technicalities. Focus on communication.

In other words, your primary goal is to create a site that allows visitors to easily determine whether you are the lawyer who is best able to solve their problem. That's all they really want to know. **LP**

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