



Lessons learned from a day of competitor research

Researching your competitors is an important aspect of both the website design and marketing process. Keeping an eye on what others in your field (and locality) are doing helps provide important insight as to what works and what doesn't. It also helps you avoid making the mistake of marketing your firm in a way that is too similar to that of other attorneys in your area. If your website looks just like that of your competitors, it will not be memorable, and prospects will have no way of knowing why they should hire you over any other firm.

If you can approach the research process thinking like a client and not an attorney, you will be able to see the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. Do any of your competitors present information in a unique or interesting way? What aspects of your competitors' websites do you find confusing and what parts are easy to use? Researching what works – but not copying it – can help you build a website that communicates more effectively with visitors.

Sometimes, you come across a website that seems to do everything right. I recently came across a site like this when doing research for a client. What started as a simple exploration of the site from an unbiased fact-finding perspective ended with me completely convinced that I should employ their services. I do not need these services, nor did I come to the website as a prospective client, but I was convinced nonetheless. What did they do so that worked so well? Here are three of their biggest successes.

Really good, informative content. Visitors can tell when your website content has been churned out in an attempt to fill page after page with relevant keywords that please search engines. That type of writing sounds awkward, and when you dig into it, there is actually very little substance. Fortunately, search engines are catching on to this trick and are at least trying to give more weight to content that sounds like it was written to be read by human beings. And that is what good websites should have. What worked was not the sheer volume of content. What worked was that the content was relevant, interesting, well-written and clearly explained. They did not have to talk about how knowledgeable and experienced they are; they just showed it. This builds a much deeper level of trust with the user.

The right attitude. There is a reason that some sales people get a bad reputation – and why some attorneys hate sales and marketing. Bad sales copy is not only cheesy, it's a little insulting to its audience. There is a quality about good website content (which is sales copy in its own way) that is difficult to describe, and that is part of what makes it so effective. Users need to genuinely feel as though they are being spoken to like a responsible, intelligent adult. Yes, they need to be directed to take certain actions, but they also need to know why. A website with the wrong attitude – one that does not respect its visitors – will not be able to show people why they need your service. Speak to prospects with a tone that says you understand they need to make an important decision and you know they're smart enough to see through cliched marketing.

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Great design. Good design in this case means several things. At the most basic level, the site, as a whole, was attractive to look at. It used a limited palette of colors and fonts that harmonized well. There was enough white space around the text and images to give your eyes time to rest, and content was split into easily digestible segments. All of this combines to make it easy to stay on the site longer.

On top of being visually appealing, the information was well organized. While the site easily contained over a hundred pages, I had no trouble finding what I was looking for and navigating straight to it. When a website is well organized, it can present a lot of information without being overwhelming. People will not end up bouncing around from page to page to page, getting whiplash and leaving. They are more likely to stay long enough to fill out a form or make a phone call. And, when a website is well-designed and easy to navigate, people are more likely to remember it recommend it to others.

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