

# Measuring Law Firm Website Success

Steve Matthews | May 2011

“How do we know if our website is delivering value?” More law firm partners are asking this question these days, especially when the website commands a noticeable chunk of the IT or marketing budgets (or both). However, unlike many IT projects (usually marked as depreciating capital assets) or marketing efforts (often difficult to link to new business), law firm websites can be measured in a variety of ways, with each metric weighted differently depending on the view of the lawyer or firm involved. Consider some of the following methods:

**1. Website traffic.** It’s hard to argue with the ongoing count of unique visitors passing through your website on a monthly basis. Yes, it’s possible that these visitors aren’t staying, or that they’re not connecting with the firm’s message, or not calling. But visitors still count for something important: they’re people who are viewing information about your services or commentary. Accordingly, firms need to count traffic with an analytics tool on their website.

The most popular these days (not coincidentally, a free service) is Google Analytics, but there are a host of others. While it’s important to watch traffic, firms should be careful not to “micro-track” and read too much into small sample sizes, especially during the low points. Almost all firm websites experience traffic dips in August and December, for example. Monitoring traffic quarterly or annually is a much better idea. Going further, Google Analytics has a useful time comparison tool that allows you to evaluate current traffic against prior time periods; both quarter-to-quarter and year-over-year comparisons can be extremely telling.

**2. Incoming links.** How many other websites link into your website? This is the fundamental question of “link popularity,” where search engines value both the number of incoming links and, the increasingly important *diversity* of those incoming link sources. As an example, a website with ten inbound links from ten different websites is better off than a site with ten links coming from a single domain.

As search engines get smarter, we’re also seeing additional weight given to links coming from websites published on similar topics. For instance, two blogs writing in the same area and linking back and forth are considered more authentic than websites with no common subject. For those interested in reviewing their own website’s link network, the tool of choice, surprisingly, isn’t a Google product. In 2005, Google stopped showing its comprehensive list of incoming links, leaving Yahoo Site Explorer <http://siteexplorer.search.yahoo.com/> as the most reliable measure of link popularity. And now, with Bing delivering Yahoo search results, there is some question how long Yahoo’s tool may exist. Nonetheless, incoming link counts remain an important and valuable metric.

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**3. Search engine rankings.** Monitoring a firm's target phrases in search rankings is also a common measure of success. Search Engine Ranking Pages ("the SERPs," in SEO lingo) are constantly in flux, however, so again, it's advisable not to over-monitor: a #1 ranking can fall to #3 and climb back to #1 in the space of a week. The primary goal is a website with enough "domain trust" to be included in Google's top search sets (achieving top-30 rankings is often the first "trust" hurdle, prior to moving into top-10 positioning).

**4. Intakes or leads generated.** The number of intakes from the website should be one of the best possible measures a firm can employ. Unfortunately, these contacts don't always pass through the website (phone calls and direct emails also count), so firms must rely on lawyers to record and capture this metric. Tracking can become increasingly difficult as firms get larger and the spread of plausible firm contacts grows with it. At a minimum, firms should count intakes from website contact forms and conduct periodic reviews with practice leaders (or other primary contacts) regarding whether inquiries are actually occurring.

**5. Number of files opened.** In addition to counting leads, capturing referral metrics during the file opening process is also a good idea. File-opening forms (or their electronic equivalents) are employed at almost every law firm. If you haven't done so already, create a dedicated section on this form to track the origin of new business. You can then create an additional option for "website or internet" to track online activities. Monitoring the number of files opened is only part of the value created, however. When we apply these classifications within accounting software, we can place a dollar value to each genre of business development activity.

**6. Profile-building opportunities.** Some of the value derived from the firm's online participation simply won't show up in an ROI equation. These "opportunities" will come in many forms, including speaking engagements, publication opportunities, media interviews, advisory board offers, or industry association involvement, to name a few. Tracking these new opportunities, even anecdotal references, gives firms a better picture of the value generated by the website.

Unlike traditional forms of building profile and attracting business, law firm websites are more susceptible to metrics and tracking. Do those numbers tell a complete story? Measured alone, my answer would be "rarely." But in tracking the firm's web presence with multiple types of data, I believe we create a clearer picture. The more insights we consider, the more we illuminate the value that the law firm website provides.

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