

Law Firm SEO Tactics to Avoid in 2013

Steve Matthews | February 2013

Over the past year, Google has made a number of significant changes to its delivery of search engine rankings. In light of those changes, law firms that employ various aggressive search marketing tactics need to reconsider them. In this column, I want to highlight some of the major web-spam filters that Google has created and offer some important (and ethical) lessons for maintaining a strong search engine presence.

Let's start by discussing a couple of those changes.

Penguin and Panda

Major alterations to Google's ranking methods tend to be given nicknames, kind of like hurricanes — but for some businesses, these “filters” on search results can (at least virtually) be just as devastating. In 2012, Google used *Penguin* and *Panda* to cull from their search results a number of websites that used questionable methods. Occasionally these filters also caught a few high-quality websites; but for the most part, the new search results were an improvement.

The first of these tweaks, *Penguin*, went after sites whose inbound link profiles were built around artificial or low-quality links — websites that had few or no real incoming links or signs of engagement. A firm that built its website marketing around links coming from thousands of unattended (spammy) websites, for example, would be at risk for a *Penguin*-driven removal of their domain from the search results. Even more blatant examples might include a site that constructed its own network of “empty” linked websites, or purchased links to such a network from a third party.

The *Panda* filter, to describe it simply, targeted websites that published (in many cases, mass-published over a short period of time) too much low-quality content — pure web-spam. These are websites that have been overtly replicated: often built in an automated fashion, with repetitive or mildly tweaked messages. Publishing the same copied material on multiple-domains owned by the same business can now push those domains out of the search results.

Few law firms employ the tactics targeted by either of these filters, but there are still some lessons lawyers can learn:

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- You still want fresh inbound links to your website, but buying them is never the answer. Don't do it.
- Avoid re-publishing the same articles on multiple firm-owned domains. Instead, create a customized summary for each particular audience, and link over to the original piece.
- Websites with unique content that generate a variety of engagement styles (links, comments, social media conversations, etc.) always paint a positive picture with Google.
- Find out who exactly is linking into your firm website. If those links look like spam, they probably are. Reconsider how those links came to be, and whether you're marketing to the right audience.

Dialed-up Anchor Text Filters for Homepages

One of the hallmark signals for search relevance has long been the words or phrases we make into clickable links. For the past ten years, websites in competitive markets have battled to acquire the most links that utilized their target search phrase, building up what's called "link text".

Abuse and spam? You bet. So Google alleviated the problem by filtering out those sites with excessive "commercial" link text profiles. But for those firms flirting with the edge of "optimization", this kind of filtering remained somewhat rare, and it still worked — at least until the second half of 2012. Google has now turned up the dial significantly.

Firms that chose to swap and build links with marketing-oriented link text (in some cases, with almost nothing but) have watched their search rankings dip in recent months. Probably the worst affected were new websites under a year old and without any other search signals to offer Google (reflecting a lack of "domain trust").

The homepages of some law firms, in my view, could be at a similar risk, and should beware of the link text running into their homepage, because it sends mixed signals to Google. Firm homepages are normally branded around the firm's name, which is reasonable; but if the links coming in all say "DUI lawyers" in the link text, those two pieces don't match — at least, not in Google's eyes.

Here at Stem, we've been advising our clients to steer clear of commercial link text directed at their homepage. Branded links — linking on the firm's name, "Smith LLP", for example — are performing much better. And while pointing some commercial link text at the homepage remains an effective (and safe) approach, and is even somewhat required in competitive markets, lowering the percentage of commercial link text aimed at your firm homepage is smart.

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More search lessons for 2013:

- You need to understand which terms and phrases are considered “commercial” by Google. To do this, conduct searches for your firm’s services and observe the number of paid advertisements displayed.
- Sending mass amounts of commercial link text at a new or unmarketed website is a recipe for disaster.
- Domain age counts. New websites are fragile, and they get clipped by over-optimization filters faster than their older counterparts.
- Build search trust around your firm’s name and your lawyer’s names; then let your practice pages and content deliver commercial search term exposure.

Exact Match Domain Names

I wrote a piece here at Slaw a couple years ago that discussed, among other topics, the effectiveness of commercial keywords in domain names[<http://www.slaw.ca/2010/02/25/domain-name-issues-for-law-firms/>]. That approach of registering two or three commercial terms in a domain name, and getting instant results with little effort, is drawing to a close. Those domains targeting commercial search phrases have recently become less effective, and when Google deems domains to be “low quality”, they may even be filtered out of the search results [<http://www.seroundtable.com/google-emd-update-15776.html>].

These domain names aren’t necessarily “dead”, but other measurable signs of engagement are also now required. Simply having a great domain name, alone, is no longer enough to jump to the top of the search rankings. At the very least, having social media presence, and a regular flow of original content (and deep links flowing into that content) is going to be a requirement before these types of sites can rank well. Or, put another way, the playing field has been leveled: there are no more shortcuts to top placement.

More lessons?

- Reduce the number of commercial terms in microsite and blog domains. A maximum of two seems sensible. (avoid: toronto-vancouver-drunk-driving-lawyers.com)
- No hyphens in domain names; this has always looked “spammy”, and still does.
- Keep the quality signals high: good links come from established organizations who publish on the

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same topics as your firm does. PageRank isn't always the best measure, but avoid links from sites with a "PR0" or "PR1".

- And an optional personal tip — I avoid online press releases for new websites. These releases often get scraped and published as 'instant content' for scam websites, sending a high volume of low-quality links into your new web property.

Conclusion

Remember, Google's role is to index your website and then measure its relevance against the rest of the web. With billions of websites competing against each other, sites that can demonstrate their audience's engagement are going to be considered stronger.

Some law firms (and some search consultants) will look at those measurable search signals (links, likes, +1s) and ask, "How do we get those attributes? At all costs, how much, and how fast can we make that happen?" Not only is this the wrong approach, but it's the type of manipulative behaviour that Google is now trying to eliminate.

The better approach is to treat these signals as the aftermath of your marketing. SEO, based on long-term thinking, can be truly effective when we make good choices: on publishing, building audiences, coding, classification, proper description, and most important, connecting with people. Many of the issues mentioned in this column are simply the result of short-term thinking and poor marketing choices.

Next column, I'll turn the tables and look at some of the best SEO investments for 2013.

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