

## Evolution of the Personal Injury Practice in the Internet Age

I have been a practicing personal injury attorney for the past 23 years. When I first started, attorney advertising on television was just beginning. A firm based in Columbia had paved the way through a Supreme Court ruling based on First Amendment arguments. For a very long while, the standard advertising practice was a phone book listing and perhaps a small ad. Other forms included radio, newspaper, direct mail, and, of course, word of mouth referrals. Lawyers then began what essentially became an "arms race" and started filling the airwaves with multiple ads to the point you could not watch television during the daytime without a constant assault during the breaks. Then came the ad wars in telephone books... The birth of the "double truck" (2 adjoining pages) became the standard. And soon, the bulk of the "yellow pages" was nothing but lawyer ads. Later, firms started buying back covers and tabs. Before too long, the local phone directory essentially transformed into a Bar guide with each firm trying to outdo the other with promises of "we care" or "we fight" or "we help" injured people.

With the demise of print media in general, there has been an evolutionary exit from telephone books and migration to the internet. Fortunately for general internet browsers, one has to actively search for lawyers and can avoid most advertisements other than the paid ads at the top and sides of pages.

The best part of this change in reaching out to clients is that the internet is substantially cheaper than those other mediums. Television commercials are still utilized but for a very high price and a demographic of clients that tend to sue frequently for relative minor "injuries." Additionally, most young people exercise their "skip commercials" feature on TiVo. Nevertheless, lawyers still flock to TV ads and take their chances. Unfortunately, the high costs can only work long term if the result is a large volume of cases. Otherwise, this business model will fail. And, by the way, a large case volume and call ratio requires more staff. You can see how quickly this strategy can "snowball" against a small firm.

Radio is also still a great branding tool. But, as with television, few people are waiting with pen and paper in hand to write down your phone number. As a result, radio works best in conjunction with an overall broad-based advertising campaign, including other advertising methods. One of those other methods is billboards. With the decrease in print ads, we are now seeing more and more billboard ads, especially in depressed areas. However, too many lawyer ads on every other billboard can have a negative impact on the profession. Many ads that actively recruit accident cases and promises of "turn your wreck into a check" make lawyers in general look like "vultures" and "ambulance chasers." It really just depends on what type of lawyer and what type of practice is being sought.

By far, the best use of funds and most efficient advertising campaign today is a [well-designed and substantive website](#). With the internet, you are appealing directly to those who are actually searching for help. And, if your website conveys seriousness, as opposed to flashing lights and promises of easy money for an accident, you will be received as a true professional and should expect to be rewarded with better cases. The only drawback to internet advertising is the new time commitment required to become and remain viable. In the telephone book days, one only had to focus on advertising once a year. After the final ad was approved and went to press, there was nothing else to be done. Hopefully, you liked your ad because it was not subject to any changes until the next year. With the internet, you can literally make as many changes as you want. And, search engines apparently like "fresh content" on a regular basis. Further, there are so many other "social sites" such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and others that must be engaged. Even after you achieve some prominence on internet searches, you still cannot fully rest as a stagnant website will begin to fall out of favor over time. The only real question is whether you want to pay a "turnkey" service such as [FindLaw](#) (which does a great job) or try to manage

content and SEO through other sources or on your own. My personal choice for competitors OUTSIDE OF MY SEARCH AREA is [Ephricon](#), an SEO firm based in Charlotte.

As an "old school" lawyer, it has been fascinating to see our profession change so dramatically in regards to advertising. Certainly, we have become much more competitive given the surging numbers of new graduates (God bless them). However, the internet also gives us an opportunity to truly impart real information and improve our reputation to those individuals in need of our services. If we seize this chance to raise our status, we will all benefit by having greater respect from the public, and as importantly, from potential jurors who decide our cases.

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