

Missed Web Opportunities

By Sharon Berman

True story: Several weeks ago, I had lunch with two partners from a boutique law firm. As the conversation segued from how an improved website would better showcase their work to a discussion of the opportunities they could attract through search engine marketing, or SEM, I heard the usual mantra — no one will search for a firm like theirs online and then call them cold. Nonetheless, I encouraged the attorneys to consider broadening their view.

When I spoke with one of the attorneys this week, he told me that he had received a call from a dream prospect whose corporate counsel had done an online search and found their firm. If with a poor website this firm was able to generate a terrific lead like this, think what they could do if they really focused on using their website and search engine marketing as lead-generation tools. Now with this recent online-initiated success, the partners are reconsidering their previous stance on the benefits of an enhanced website and online marketing.

I've had several similar discussions with attorneys lately about generating qualified leads through SEM — an umbrella term that refers to optimizing your website organically for high search-engine rankings, as well as incorporating pay-per-click ads, such as the sponsored results of a Google search. What tends to emerge from these conversations is similar to the response in my initial example — an age-old resistance to creating qualified leads through online marketing.

Not long ago, I had one such exchange during a meeting with lawyers from several different firms. One of these firms recently revamped its website. While this firm's attorney saw value in the website revision, he believed that no one would search online



for an attorney with his expertise; therefore, there was no need for any more online focus.

I am puzzled as to why so many intelligent attorneys think that a qualified prospect from the corporate world would not search for a lawyer online, and if persuaded by the website, give them a call. A well-designed and comprehensive website with substantive attorney biographies offers more information than someone would need to know in order to contact that firm or attorney. Consequently, when attorneys rely solely on referrals, they miss opportunities that come from a much broader universe. It makes sense, then, to vastly increase the certainty that your name will be in the ring and found through a Google or similar search.

For smaller firms that are competing with larger or more well-established firms, a professional website, along with SEM, offers the best opportunity to level the playing field. It doesn't do any good to simply say that you're a hidden gem and can do the same caliber of work as larger firms without charging as much. A potential client may believe you, but perhaps his own job is on the line. You are creating even more of a challenge for this prospect to persuade company management that you can do the

same quality of work when you have a dull, outdated website or even an average one. You need to demonstrate your prowess to your prospects by creating online platforms that make your case.

In today's world, developing and nurturing your website and other online marketing tools do not need to be cost prohibitive. There is something available for every budget, which is why online marketing is a treasure trove you can't afford to miss. Additionally, your website and related online marketing form a living, breathing entity you must consistently support. So it's important to look at your website launch or your revitalization as an ongoing, evolutionary process. This can sound overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. You just need to get started, and you can do so without hiring a specialist.

A group of young attorneys launched their firm several years ago and have watched business continue to grow. They posted a "placeholder" website when they opened their firm, and they have not focused on it since. They hadn't done anything to enhance their search engine rankings — despite the firm being in a practice where prospective clients regularly research online. When one of the attorneys spoke with me about SEM, he outlined all the reasons the firm hadn't done anything in that regard. For instance, the partners had talked with several search engine

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Missed Web Opportunities *(continued)*

optimization (SEO) professionals and deemed it too competitive and expensive.

Often, there are misconceptions about optimizing search engine rankings. Qualified search professionals do a lot off-page and behind the scenes, which contributes to higher rankings. But more than anything, both you and they need substantive, relevant, persuasive and up-to-date content on your site, such as practice descriptions that differentiate you, case studies, representative successes, press releases, publications and more. You and your firm are the point persons to provide this, and you can begin this process immediately.

It's important to remember that someone who has been referred to you has also been referred to others. Your prospect is looking at your competitors, so it's vital that when she lands on your website, she recognizes right away that you are the perfect choice. That comes through clear, concise content, which starts with you and your firm writing copy or giving input to a professional. From a search perspective, an SEM professional can help drive traffic to your site, but you still need a site that hooks visitors right away. Otherwise, potential clients will immediately leave. If you're waiting to develop this content because a new site is in the works, don't delay. You'll need this material for your new site as well as your current one.

My advice to the lawyer with the burgeoning firm was to do just that — create content and get it up on the firm's site to strengthen what is already there. It may be several years before this young firm decides to redo its entire website or engage a search professional. In that time, this attorney could add much more material to the site that showcases the firm's expertise and successes, and which may contribute to higher search engine rankings.

A colleague reminded me that with the thousands of searches being done for lawyers every day, it stands to reason that fewer referrals are being requested or made. Your prospects are going to the web first. When potential clients find a relevant site or biography that appears at the top of their search engine results they click to that page and find professionals who fill the bill. Most likely, they will call those individuals first. They may also call a colleague and ask for a referral, but it is also possible that they may not.

I heard an anecdote recently about a marketing "expert" who counseled clients to ignore SEO, claiming it has become too competitive and costly, and that they should instead concentrate on social media, such as LinkedIn and Facebook. That advice isn't sound. Ranking high in search engine results is competitive, and more so in some

fields than in others, but it's still doable and can fit within most budgets. Additionally, the likelihood of being found through a Google search term on Facebook, for example, is not very high. If a firm is going to make social media work, it still takes time and effort. Social media is an important aspect of online marketing, but not to the exclusion of SEM. The only upside to this person's counsel, however, was that the more people there are who remain out of the search engine fray, the better it is for the rest of us who know its advantages and choose to participate.

SEM is not a panacea; you have to be willing to accept that there will be many more unqualified leads than qualified ones. Just like with any marketing, you need to sift through the pebbles to find the gems. Still, if you want to develop more business and don't want to be left behind, I encourage you to put aside antiquated notions that prevent you from being found online. SEM grows more competitive every day, but there is also tremendous opportunity to use it to your advantage and grow your business. Don't get stuck in old thinking and allow the value of a rich online presence to pass you by. ■

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