

Easy, Essential SEO for Lawyers and Law firms

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If your law firm is not showing up on the first page of search results, you are nowhere. Very few online searchers ever go beyond the first page of results. In the eyes of Internet users (everyone), if you do not appear on this first page, you are not credible. You will not get the call.

What can you do to improve your search engine results?

Search engine optimization (SEO) is an online marketing strategy that helps position your firm among the top results for given search terms. It involves creating a structure for your website that meets the need of search engines, and populating your site with a constant supply of fresh, keyword-rich content.

Automated search engine spiders constantly “crawl” through web pages, compiling word indexes which they then use to rank pages based on algorithms. The algorithms assign varying weights to elements like keywords and phrases, as well as links. The resulting calculation pushes some web pages higher on a search engine results page than others.

“Search engine spiders must be able to access and easily make their way through all of the pages of your website,” said Kim Mears. “Anything that prevents them from doing so will affect your ranking. Poor optimization could even prevent your site from being indexed at all.”

Mears is chief visionary officer and founder of [Mears Interactive](#), a Denver-based online marketing agency. She discussed search engine optimization before the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the [Legal Marketing Association](#). The presentation took place Jan. 8 at Sullivan’s Steakhouse in Denver.

“The basics of SEO are not hard to master,” said Mears. “There are things you must do and things you must avoid. In general, you should track your results using Google Analytics, choose the right keywords, create effective metatags, build incoming links and add well-written, fresh content.”

Is Your Law Firm Website Working?

Although there are a number of search engines, Google dominates this field with 85 percent of search traffic. “If you aim to optimize for Google and its algorithms,” said Mears, “you should be in pretty good shape with any search engine.”

[Google Analytics](#) is a service offered by Google that generates detailed statistics about traffic on a website. The basic service is free and fills the needs of most lawyers and law firms. It generates useful reports on site performance and tracks visitors from online referral sources.

“Google Analytics provides valuable insight into the effectiveness of your website,” said Mears. “You need to know what’s going on. Once you have a clear picture of what is working well, you can do more of it. When you have a clear picture of what is working poorly or not at all, you can fix it or eliminate it.”

Reports generated by an analytics program can be used to determine visitors, bounce rates and page views. “Unique visitors or users are the number of distinct entities that visit your site,” said Mears. “‘Bounce rate’ refers to the number of visitors who look at one page, don’t find anything they need, and leave the site immediately. A bounce rate above 40 percent is bad.”

Page view reports also yield useful data. “The longer visitors stay on your site, the more useful the site is and the higher Google ranks the site,” said Mears. “Page views let you know exactly how long visitors stay on your site, what pages they look at, which pages are most popular and which path they follow through your site. Internal links encourage visitors to navigate throughout your site.”

Analytics programs will also let you know which external domains are referring visitors to your site – search engines, directories, ads, social media or other websites.

Keywords Do the Heavy Lifting

SEO involves researching the most relevant and searched keywords and phrases for your practice and target industry, and using them so that your website will get more traffic.

Analytics programs will let you know the exact keywords or phrases that visitors are using to find you. “Never assume that you know the best keywords,” said Mears. “There are as many words (and spellings of those words) used to search for something as there are individuals. If your website does not include the exact words a user enters in a query, your site will not show up in the search engine result set.

“Once you know the most common keywords, make sure that they appear throughout the site – in content and in metatags,” said Mears. Good keywords include “lawyer” and “attorney” and “law firm,” as well as words related to geographic location, areas of practice, and industries and problems of clients.

In choosing keywords, remember to use words that a potential client would use rather than words that an attorney would use. Be specific. “Bitten by a dog” is more specific than “personal injury.” The [Wordtracker](#) website provides valuable information on keywords you are using or considering.

Create Effective Metatags

Metatags are searchable terms that lie “beneath” each page of a website. Although metadata are not displayed, they are visible to search engine spiders. To see the metatags on your site, right click on a page and then go to “view source.”

“What appears when you do this is a page of code,” said Mears. “Near the top of that code, you will see metatag titles, descriptions and keywords. If these areas are populated with automatically generated strings of text and numbers, this is a problem. There is nothing for the spiders to read.”

Each page on a website should have its own unique metadata. Poor metatags will significantly compromise your search engine results.

The title tag is the title that you want to appear as the link at the top of a search result. It should identify the contents of a document and be 72 characters or fewer, so it will appear in its entirety.

The description tag tells the search engine and viewers what your page or site is about. It contains the descriptive text that appears on a results page underneath the title. “A page with a good description tag will entice more people to click through to the site itself,” said Mears. “Ideally, it should be between 150 and 160 characters. If there is nothing there, Google will populate this area with something random.”

The keywords tag includes a list of keywords. “There is much debate as to their value in the location,” said Mears, “but they can’t hurt. Keywords included here must actually appear somewhere in the page and should not exceed 500 characters. “

Incoming Links Add Weight

Your website can have two kinds of links – outbound and inbound. It never hurts to link to credible sources from your website, but it does not do much to enhance SEO.

“Having inbound links, where other Internet sites link to your, is important,” said Mears. “It is seen as an endorsement. The more popular your website is, as measured by the number and quality of links coming to your site from other sites, the higher it will be ranked in search engines. The more popular the site that links to you, on a scale of 1-10, the bigger the boost.”

Incoming links should be from websites and pages that contain content relevant to the law, your practice, your focus industry, or your location. “You can have an intern methodically contact these sites and ask that they link to you,” said Mears. Sites with ‘.edu’ and ‘.gov’ are ranked particularly high.

Content Marketing Takes the Stage

The hottest new element in the field of SEO is content marketing – providing a steady stream of interesting and informative content to improve your rankings in organic (non-paid) search results.

Content can be words (including web pages, blog posts, articles, lists, press releases and white papers), but it can also be photos, videos, slide decks or webinars. Linking back from content you post on Facebook or YouTube brings with it the high popularity weight of those sites, which rank 10 on a scale of 1-10.

Search engines search only words. Any time you use non-verbal content, like a picture or video, be sure to have good, keyword-rich “alt tags” behind them.

Search engines love words, and they give twice the weight to the words on home pages as they do to other pages. “It is a huge mistake when a law firm’s home page is heavy in graphics, especially flash graphics, and light in words,” said Mears. “If there are no words there, especially important keywords and phrases, search engines will pass this page right by.”

Home pages should also include keyword-rich internal links. “You should be able to reach every page of your website from the home page,” said Mears. “A site map containing links to your website’s various sections or pages also helps make sure the search engines find their way.”

Content that is attractive to search engines will be useful and informative. It will balance good use of keywords and phrases with natural phrasing. Emphasize keywords in headlines, subheads and the first sentence/paragraph of each section. Use heading tags, which carry extra weight.

Be aware that search engines will penalize any content that is not original. If you plan to syndicate content to more than one page, section or site, change it up a bit.

Take Off Your Black Hat

“The Google algorithm is very smart,” said Mears, “and it gets smarter every day. You might think that you can fool it, but you can’t. Do not unnaturally ‘stuff’ or ‘cram’ your site with keywords. Do not include keywords and links in the same color as background text, in hopes of hiding them and juicing up your results. Do not use metatags that do not match page content. Do not work with ‘link farms.’”

“Once Google has associated you with such ‘black hat’ practices, you will be penalized with reduced rankings or even elimination from their database,” said Mears. “The only way to get indexed and ranked again once this happens is to change your URL – and your practices.”