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What's Hot in Law Firm Web Marketing?

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1. Introduction:

Building a cohesive approach may just be the most important aspect of marketing the modern law firm over the web. Constantly entertaining a mix of operations, Firms must build and track their web presence for regional offices, areas of practice, individual lawyers and the firm as a whole. And with the number of brands managed by the firm marketing departments ever increasing, the concept of a unified message or *brand control* may just be a thing of the past. Firms must develop guidelines and goals for their various web marketing entities, and then empower those groups and individuals to expand mind share within their target audiences.

In the future, we can expect legal web brands to be more loosely managed. Firms will seek to build bodies of work that extend their reputation and codify the firm's expertise and experience. Firms will also be forced to break down the faceless image of *the firm*, and to create brands that build trust within prospective markets. Through a greater mix of informal and formal communication, firms will seek tools that 1) help lawyers communicate one-to-one and build personal trust based contacts; and 2) tools that help lawyers qualify their professional experience and expertise.

This paper will discuss the latest tools and trends for law firm web marketing.

2. The Web 2.0 Trend in Legal Marketing:

Web 2.0, or the *read-write web*, are for the lack of a better label *jargon terms* that define a new paradigm for modern websites – those that encourage both publishing authority and audience participation. The goal of the web 2.0 website is to increase author-to-audience interaction, discussion, and ultimately a permanent codified written conversation. In the web 2.0 environment, it's important to note that 'readers' may also be publishers; where driven by blogging and syndication technology, website authors will exchange ideas, and critique the concepts and ideas expressed. These digitized conversations are permanently codified, for better or worse, and can have an ongoing impact on the firm's overall online presence.

For law firms, the Web 2.0 trend has presented many opportunities to market online. By comparison with traditional mainstream media – newspapers, magazines, TV, and Radio – many early adopting lawyers have been liberated to enter into these conversations without the need of an intermediary, i.e. a Public Relations (PR) professional or Reporter, at their side. With this barrier to entry removed, lawyers are able to directly engage audiences and the decision makers they wish to target. Through the use of technologies like web logs (or 'blogs'), podcasting, wikis, social networks, RSS feeds, and discussion forums, among others, lawyers are able to converse on a more personal level to prospective clients.

3. The Benefits of Web Marketing to the Lawyers

Lawyers and law firms achieve many benefits from exposing themselves over the web. From an inexpensive tactic to promoting their brand, to humanizing communications or connecting with decision makers, the web has a lot to offer. The following is a brief list of benefits law firms should consider.

3.1 *Increased Media Exposure*

Most modern reporters have bought into web conversations much faster than law firms have. Many law bloggers just starting up are often surprised how quickly a reporter finds their post when they write about something news worthy. Why? The answer is in a technology called RSS – or Real Simple Syndication. With it, reporters can set up readers that constantly scan the world's blog postings – otherwise known as the *blogoshphere* - for either a very focused set of topics; or, a targeted group of professionals who blog within a certain genre that fits their desired coverage, or *beat*.

Putting yourself into the Reporter's shoes for a moment and consider the alternatives available. Which makes for an easier story? Pre-canned quotes from the stack of press releases sitting at the fax machine, or these digital conversations, often created by the desired target audience you intend to write for? While the question is often raised, whether or not

bloggers should be considered media, few reporters or bloggers will question the fact that there is an ongoing dynamic between blogs and Main Stream Media ("MSM") news coverage. Ironically, one of the fastest ways to achieve the desired result of old school PR and MSM coverage – the front of the newspaper, or a feature on the nightly news – is to engage or participate in these digital conversations that takes place prior to coverage. The fact remains, if it *flies* within the blogoshphere, most reporters are forced to conclude that the story is engaging, and will *fly* with MSM coverage.

Engaging in web-based conversations is the precursor to a lawyer's potential inclusion in such a process. Without a personal website, or blog, lawyers are reliant on a previous relationship with the reporter covering the story. And with so few individuals engaged in these market conversations, those who are greatly increase their chances of possible involvement. Those that don't are often invisible.

3.2 *Referral Network Development*

One of the most persuasive arguments for marketing legal services online is the development of referral relationships. It can be a very empowering moment for many legal marketers when they realize that the true power of web marketing is not in the in inexpensive publishing power of the web (which remains true), but in the opportunity to develop global relationships within their area of expertise. These relationships are extremely valuable. It is not uncommon to see practitioners connect with individuals who can act as both intellectual peers – someone to ask questions or run scenarios with – and operate within their sphere off non-competing business contacts.

3.3 *Becoming A 'Thought Leader'*

The selling of 'expertise' has always been a crucial element of legal marketing. Why else would lawyers with heavy billable targets take months of their valuable time to write a book? Selling professional services over the web is no different, with the important additional value of marketing to a potentially much larger audience.

Thought Leadership is a phrase that's evolved in online communities to describe those individuals who become the hub of online conversations; individuals whose opinions are watched by hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of others interested in the same topic.

Becoming a *thought leader* can deliver one of the longest lasting effects to an individuals' personal brand. If we consider the fact that links are the currency of the web, and that incoming links are one of the key elements to boosting Google rankings, *thought leaders* are often in an ideal position to generate 'buzz' related to their online presence. Regardless of whether it's a blog posting, threaded discussion or a watch of what that person is reading online (one example of this is a '*linkblog*'), it is the individual *thought leader* that online observers will watch -- an effect that interestingly transcends which technology trend is the currently being embraced.

4. Identifying & Marketing of Legal Web Brands

A legal brand can have many faces. At the very least, most operations will contain a portion of the following brand elements:

I. Practice and industry groups;
II. Offices operating in multiple cities;
III. A recognizable collection of public-facing lawyers;
IV. A holistic concept of values and strategic direction that guides ***'the firm'***.

On the web, it is these varying components that together make up the firm's online brand. As often occurs in the offline setting, it is possible to see any one of these components operating in a solo fashion – the exception typically being ***'the firm'***. One of the interesting distinctions of online marketing is that smaller components within the firm brand can become fully functional (and successful) without a connection to the holistic 'firm' concept.

Another important aspect of legal web brands is the connectivity between the elements. Law firms have traditionally maintained their entire web operations on a single website, with all

information and marketing content related to the firm, offices, lawyers and practice areas located at the firm's principal web address (i.e. 'www.firmname.com'). In approximately 2005 to 2006, the use of blog technology began to change this approach. As lawyers and law firms began to build '*content-based web properties*' for marketing purposes, they started to see the widening of the firm brand away from the single site approach, and moving toward what I describe as a **'Hub-n-Wheel' approach**.

The **Hub-n-Wheel approach** is a strategy that positions all content elements that help qualify a law firm's expertise and experience on the firm's principal website ('the Hub'). Some examples of information that might help a potential client *qualify* a lawyer or law firm: group pages, detailed lawyer profiles, testimonials, success stories, client lists, transaction lists, speaking engagements, or media quotes. In turn (no pun intended), the 'spokes of the wheel' are what could be best described as content-based web properties designed specifically for marketing purposes – one example of this being lawyer blogs.

It is anticipated that in the future law firms will surround themselves with many content-based web properties as a 'draw' for web readers, and as a tool for business networking. The purpose to developing each of these websites will likely (or should) be driven by the firm's core areas of expertise – with a website targeted at each of the areas the firm has a vested interest in. These content properties may be sponsored by individuals or by functional groups within the firm – based around services, industries, or by desired audience. The ***mix*** of content properties a firm offers will become the control mechanism for firms to adjust their online brand.

5. Top Web Marketing Tools in 2007

5.1 Search Engine Optimization & Marketing

Why Search Engines are Important for Law Firms

If you have only just started to consider search engine marketing for your law firm, you are not alone. While most law firms have some sort of website in 2007, the majority are not "marketing" on the Internet in the sense of seeking out ways to drive new business to the website and the firm. This is true even for "consumer-oriented" firms such as those that practice personal injury law and family law. Such firms often focus their marketing campaigns on the Yellow Pages. More marketing-oriented firms might also use some combination of transit advertising, billboards or community newspapers.

However, the reality is that huge numbers of potential clients are searching for lawyers using Internet search engines such as Google. It is not uncommon for law firms to report Google as their top source of web traffic. Holding the number one position for the right high-volume search phrase can often be akin to being the only full-page advertisement in this modern yellow pages. The usage of the search engines is also increasing every month, and the result is that a "build it and they will come" approach to your firm website is increasingly insufficient. You need to be found on the search engines for search terms relevant to your practice in order to turn your website into a full-fledged marketing platform.

The measured benefits of executing a proper search-marketing program are numerous. Consider some of the following scenarios:

1. A firm has just opened a new office in the Boston and looking to increase exposure for their new regional presence. The firm develops an SEO strategy to rank for the 'Boston Law Firm' and 'Boston Lawyers;
2. A wide ranging strategy is employed to rank a firm's lawyer profile pages for each of their areas of practice expertise – e.g. 'Boston Tax Lawyer', 'Boston M&A Lawyer';

3. The firm is a market leader and sees a top regional rankings as a 'must have' – e.g. 'Portland law firm', 'Oregon Law Firm', 'Pacific Northwest law firm';
4. The firm wishes to increase market share for lucrative or high-margin area of practice – 'New York M&A Lawyer';
5. One of the firm's groups operates in a competitive regional practice area, and service pages are buried beyond the second page of search results;
6. The firm has a new or innovative service offering, and seeks the *first strike* advantage;
7. The firm is a boutique practice without geographic boundaries, and simply needs a top-10 listing to turn volume – 'Eminent Domain', 'Eminent Domain law firm';

To give you a sense of the size of this potential market for your services, here are some search statistic projections specific to law based on usage statistics and market share information provided by Yahoo Canada earlier this year:

Table 1

Estimated Search Volumes for Selected Legal Searches on Major Search Engines*

Search Term	Period Covered	Estimated Number of Searches
Vancouver Lawyer	February 2007	**14,819**
Toronto Lawyer	February 2007	**21,408**
Seattle Lawyer / Seattle Attorney	February 2007	**22,442**
Los Angeles Lawyer / Los Angeles Attorney	February 2007	**60,454**

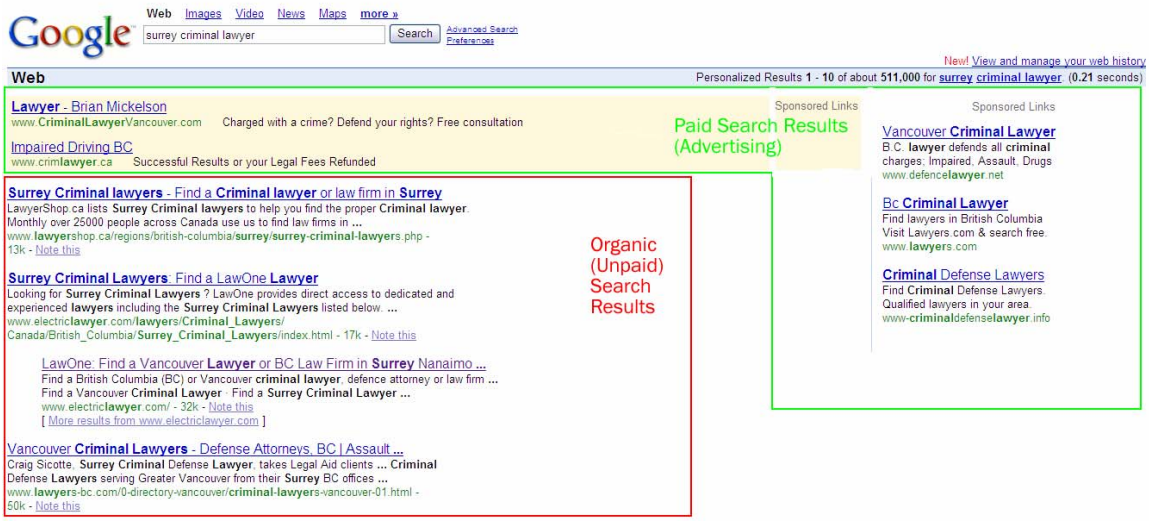
* Source: Skunkworks Creative Group Inc.

How Search Engines Work – Organic vs. Paid Results

The results generated by search engines such as Google can be divided into two major categories – **Organic listings** and **Paid listings**. The client will type certain keywords for the search into the search engine (e.g. "Vancouver family lawyer"). The search engine will then return a list of results based on matching the client's keywords with the content of your web site or the terms that you have chosen for your search engine ad. The results will include both a list of web sites that the search engine thinks match the search terms best (these are the unpaid search results – or "organic listings") and a list of paid advertisements (usually referred to as "pay-per-click" or "PPC" listings). On Google, the organic listings are on the left side and the paid listings are on the top and right sides – see the example below.

Table 2

Organic Listings and Paid Listings in Google Results



Theoretically, the organic listings should be more trusted by search users than the paid listings and the user should be more likely to click on one or more of the organic results. After all, Google's success was built on the supposed accuracy of its search results versus its

competitors. However, the lines have blurred in the last few years and anecdotal experience indicates that a lot of users do not distinguish between the two sets of results.

Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization ("SEO") usually refers to efforts to improve your website's ranking in the *organic* search results for searches that your potential clients would typically make (e.g. you want your firm to rank on the first page of the Google organic results for a search for "surrey criminal lawyer"). Taking this strategy one step further, some law firms in recent years have expanded SEO operations to target search phrases that number in the hundreds.

The big challenge with SEO is that many high frequency searches are competitive these days, especially with only 10 spots available. But not unlike its product-based cousin, the dominant effect of achieving a high search placement should not be underestimated. A top result in some circumstances can yield hundreds, if not thousands, of targeted visitors on a monthly basis. The bigger problem of course is the competition and the limited number of clicks available.

The effect of a top Search Engine placement was confirmed a few years back when, by accident, AOL released a set of search data that showed the #1 ranking to attract 42% of user clicks, #2 - 12%, #3 – 8.5%, all the way down to #10 – 3%. The long tail – *rankings #11 – 1000* received the rest, just above 11%. Suffice to say, ranking on the first page for many search phrases is more than a *desirable;* for any company (law firms included) looking to lever the marketing effect of Google - *It is a must.*

Search Engine Marketing

Search Engine Marketing ("SEM") frequently refers to advertising on the search engines - e.g. a pay-per-click ad for your firm is displayed on the Google search results page when someone searches for "surrey criminal lawyer". If the user then clicks on your ad, he or she

is taken to your firm website and you pay a fee to Google for that site visit. If he or she doesn't click on your ad, you don't have to pay anything. One of the key advantages of Pay-Per-Click advertising is it's immediacy – while it can (and frequently does) take months of considered effort to achieve first page organic search results for key phrases, you can buy your way onto the first page of Google *today* using a pay-per-click approach.

Of the various pay-per-click tools available, Google's *AdWords* program is the 800lb gorilla in the marketplace. You can find out detailed information about the program directly from Google by clicking the link for "advertising programs" on the bottom left hand corner of the Google homepage. (The Yahoo equivalent was formerly known as *Overture* but is now called *Sponsored Search).*

The pricing for various AdWords search terms is based on an auction system, which allows you to set the maximum price you are willing to pay for a visit to your site. If you are prepared to pay $1 for every visitor, and 3 other law firms are prepared to pay $2 or $4 or $6 for the same term, their ads will be placed above yours in the paid results.

The system also allows you to tightly control your AdWords budget by placing a daily maximum on your campaign that the system will not exceed. For example, if you decide that you are willing to spend a maximum of $3 for any single visitor to your site, and a daily maximum of $30 for your campaign, the system will monitor the activity on your ad and once you reach the $30 cap for any given day, Google will simply "turn off" your ad, and stop displaying it for the rest of the day, before automatically resuming it the next day. As such, you can be confident that whatever budget you set will be adhered to. You may end up spending less than your budget for a given month but you should never pay more.

One other aspect of Search Engine Marketing that should also be noted is the increasing use of paid directory listings. Increasingly, several positions on the first page of Google search results (in both the organic and paid listings) for various legal search terms are occupied by different legal directory services. Essentially, these are companies that have recognized the inherent value of top search engine placements and have utilized advanced SEO and SEM

tactics to place themselves there. They then typically charge a fee to law firms who wish to be included in the directory in order to obtain a portion of the website traffic generated by that high search engine placement. Those firms who are at the forefront of marketing on the web will frequently have paid for inclusion on multiple such directories, with a resulting "all roads lead to Rome" sort of scenario where clicking on virtually any of the top 4 or 5 Google results for a specific search phrase may take you to the same law firm. It is a judgment call on how many directory listings are "enough", but they are growing in importance.

Your overall firm objectives may determine whether you adopt SEO or SEM. However, it should be noted that the two tactics are not mutually exclusive: many firms use both to maximize their marketing impact.

5.2 Law Blogs

The blog phenomenon really became mainstream for web marketing in 2005, and now a couple years later in 2007 the impact is being felt on the legal web. Law blogs have become the dominant tools for lawyers to drive their personal profile, and with notable examples in most major markets, these personal & professional online journals have developed a reputation for being an instant celebrity maker.

Law blogs are successful in marketing professional services because of three key factors – **business networking, content driven marketing, and search engine visibility**. First off, blogs serve as 'pass card' for lawyers to network with other lawyers based upon the mutual factor that both parties have a personal web presence. That itself is noteworthy about blogs, that individuals may for the first time, and without the services of a web savvy technician, publish to the web. And once these websites are integrated to include personal opinions & intellectual inquiries, these sites often become an online representation for each lawyer's practice. Want to know more about a lawyer before you hire them? Do they have the right 'stuff'? Check out their blog and find out if they *get* your business or industry before you hire them. Lastly, blogs tend to significantly outperform traditional websites in search engine

visibility, thereby providing excellent return on investment relative to most other forms of web marketing.

5.2 Legal Podcasting – Audio Marketing for Lawyers

Another innovative technology currently available to lawyers is Podcasting. A Podcast offers users a series of downloadable audio files, typically in MP3 format and listened to on an iPod or another portable music system. Like other forms of permission-based marketing, the audience chooses to listen to the programs they choose, and on their schedule.

The content of the Podcast can vary greatly, but within the legal sphere almost always involves a topical oral discussion – be it an individual's commentary or a multi-party panel discussion. From a legal web marketing perspective, these on-demand audio programs offer a very personalized way to market a lawyer's practice. Podcasts can also be a very good fit with a certain genre of lawyer – those that are more comfortable *giving* the presentation than writing the accompanying paper. And similar to blogs, offering a Podcast series means housing the archived materials, which can demonstrate a history of subject expertise, and be a growing body of marketable content that works on the lawyer's behalf over the course of a career.

Another important aspect of the Podcast is the method of distribution. By definition, a Podcast must have a syndicated feed (a.k.a. RSS, or Real Simple Syndication) available – which allows the listener to subscribe and receive follow-up programs offered by the same author. And it is these *Feeds* that also allow for the automated re-distribution of the content to a much wider audience than what the firm can expose the content to. Rather than simply publishing the files on the firm website, the RSS feed enables the content to be sent – upon publication – to other websites such as Apple's very popular iTunes.

Finally, it is worth noting that the next logical step in the Podcasting trend is the involvement of Video technology, which can also be referred to as Video Casting, Video Blogging or "Vodcasting". (Yes, the web does coin a new phrase every 10 minutes. No proof, but…)

Video is being currently being used by a number of firms, although from the viewpoint of this paper's authors, are fighting an uphill battle. The standards for video production are often comparable to the nightly news, and very difficult to maintain 'a quality & professional production' without a substantial budget.

6. Final Conclusions

The tool selection process for the legal industry is closely tied to the type of brand awareness desired. While some tools, such as blogs, are a natural fit for driving a personal or group brand, others like SEO & search marketing are a better fit for the marketing of a service line, or driving a law firm's overall online presence. Throughout this paper we strongly advised that the form of web marketing chosen also be a good match with the parties involved. Lawyers who may be natural orators, had media training or prior experience with television may be a better fit for Podcasting or Video Blogging. And in turn, lawyers who are naturally gifted writers could greatly increase their personal profile and referral networks by starting a law blog.

The fundamentals of the Web 2.0 movement – market conversations, and audience participation – are now at play for those lawyers who choose to take part. This type of *online conversation* can humanize the face of a Lawyer's practice, and serve as an informal introduction. An analogy can be made to meeting someone at a cocktail party before a more formal meeting at the Lawyer's office. The firm website, like a law office, can be very formal; but when used in combination with the more informal conversations of web 2.0, the mix of communication styles can offer a more complete view of the lawyer in question.

Many firms in the future will attempt to build a wider strategy and adopt a holistic approach to their online marketing program. Driving this objective, firms with a concrete understanding of their 'brand' will be in the best position for success. Firms must know '*who they are*' and which aspects of their business are core. Once this direction is set, firms can turn their direction to the tactics and desired results set out in this paper: *media exposure, referral networking, and developing their lawyers as 'thought leaders'*.

Finally, a complete approach will break the law firm's web offering into four streams: *firm, practice, regional and the individual lawyers*. Only when these elements are considered as individual pieces that are directed at distinct audiences, and then re-evaluated for their potential to work together, do you begin to understand the firm's complete web profile, or 'brand'. And unlike its offline equivalent, there are concrete representations to the firm's web presence that can be measured and evaluated. Problems can be quickly identified, and successes can be replicated.

The adoption rate of many of the tools presented today, October 10, 2007, will continue to grow; and in each of our opinions, there is much fertile ground for lawyers to lay claim to their subject expertise within this modern web. The tools will improve and change over time, of course, but the strategy behind their success should remain the same.