



ROCK CREEK
STRATEGIC MARKETING



How to Turn Your Firm's Website into a Lead Generating Machine

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Today's professional services firms find themselves competing in a crowded marketplace, selling benefits that are often intangible and services that are difficult to measure. Attracting new clients is increasingly difficult given shrinking marketing budgets and increasing pressure to perform.

Savvy service firm marketers are turning to online marketing to provide better leads—at a lower cost and with measurable ROI. Simple activities, such as focusing the firm's brand, improving the firm's website content or revamping the website navigation structure, can yield promising results, while sustained activities such as search engine optimization and new media campaigns can radically improve lead count, quality and conversion.

Using online marketing to turn your firm's website into a lead generating machine won't happen overnight, but it can happen—if you make the commitment. Many of the online marketing tactics described in this article can be performed by your firm's in-house marketing team, though many firms prefer outside support to help manage sustained online marketing activities.

Focus Your Brand

If you can't communicate your firm's unique value proposition in two sentences, it will be difficult for your website to succeed in doing so. Strong branding and marketing success are inextricably linked. Your website, as the most visible manifestation of your firm's brand, must deliver messages that are clear and differentiating, and that are closely aligned with the over-arching brand strategy of the firm.

By engaging in online marketing that reinforces the firm's brand, you will minimize the confusion and mixed messages that diminish trust and dull your competitive edge. To hone a sharper edge on your brand, consider the following:

- **Strong firms need strong brands.** As the banking industry has shown, trying to be all things to all clients is a recipe for failure. To craft a brand that sets you apart, lead with your specialties.
- **A strong brand creates trust.** The economic downturn represents a colossal loss of trust. A defined brand that permeates every aspect of a client's experience engenders confidence that your firm can still deliver on its promises and that it will weather the storm.
- **Fierce competition is the new reality for service firms, and the competition will only get fiercer.** New practice areas, new geographic areas and new associates are not realistic growth engines in this market. Effective branding and marketing are the keys to maintaining your firm's position in the face of shrinking corporate budgets.

Once your brand positioning is clearly defined, making the changes required to turn your website into a lead generating machine becomes easier.

Align Your Website With Prospective Clients' Needs

To create an engaging website, service firm marketers should focus on four key components: content, structure, design and functionality. Certainly, there is considerable overlap between these elements, but the more closely they are aligned with the information needs of your clients and the strategic goals of your firm, the more effectively your site will perform.

- **Meaningful content:** Stop talking about yourself and start delivering value. Many firms take a "laundry list" approach to their online content—complete with an inventory of accolades and awards, bios and alphabetized lists of practice areas. This firm-centric, rather than customer-centric, approach is based on the top-down, one-way marketing tactics of the past. When a prospect wants to know what big intellectual property cases you have handled, they will probably not find it helpful to learn where you attended college. Firm-centric websites are effectively telling visitors, "This is what we want to tell you—not necessarily what you would like to know."

Today's prospects are looking for a richer online experience than simple lists and generic marketing messages can provide. They want useful information, and they need to feel confident that the firm they are considering has the subject matter expertise and experience to help them understand and solve very specific problems.

So how do you ensure that your content provides value? By actively focusing on making the visitor experience an engaging and informative one. Including rich content, such as case studies, articles, interviews and blog posts, gives potential clients a way to learn more about the firm while giving service providers a way to showcase their knowledge.

- **Intuitive structure:** When different audiences can easily find content that is specific to their needs, you avoid creating a one-size-fits-all user experience that satisfies no one.

Many service firms still organize their sites something like this: Our Firm, About Us, Our Practice Areas, Our News, Contact Us, etc. Where is the customer in this arrangement? This inward-looking approach does very little to help prospects understand what makes your firm unique and why they should choose you.

Consider alternate approaches that may work better to help potential clients understand your firm. For example, a tab highlighting “client successes” in your navigation menu may draw the attention of an interested potential client, and a “recent cases” tab conveys a feeling of activity that clients may find appealing.

Consider also that many prospects want to see what you have done in their particular industry—adding this functionality is an easy fix that few firms take advantage of. Also, navigation that highlights your commitment to diversity, sustainability or employee development will help you stand out to prospects who are considering those elements in their decision-making process.

- **Effective design:** Is the firm established and traditional, or is it cutting-edge and dynamic? Site design must quickly convey the firm's brand positioning and set a strong emotional tone of trust.

Color choices, imagery, font styles and other design elements should all reinforce your high-level positioning. No matter what your brand position, your design and messaging must be audience appropriate, consistent and professional.

Visitors must be able to easily find the information they are searching for and be able to validate your firm's expertise in each specialty. The design should make it simple for users to orient themselves within the website, and should present information in a manner that is clear, intuitive and thoughtful.

- **Maximum functionality:** Functionality is essential to a strong user experience, but like content, structure and design, it must also align with your brand and be valuable to the prospective client. Make sure that any “cutting edge” functionality exists for a specific reason.

For example, a video presentation has the potential to be a tremendous marketing tool, bringing your firm's personality to life and letting viewers engage with you at an emotional level. But a video that simply spreads the firm's marketing messages without providing additional value is of questionable usefulness. When a prospect is searching for an accounting firm in Washington, DC, he or she will not find it helpful to take a virtual tour of your headquarters in New Jersey.

The same need to deliver value rather than hype applies to any web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and social networking, which are addressed later in this article.

Let Prospects Choose You with Effective Search Engine Optimization

Ensuring that your site is user-friendly is the first step. Ensuring that users can find your site comes right after that. Your firm may be the perfect match for a prospective client, but if a client who is researching firms like yours online doesn't find your website, you won't even make it to the first meeting. That's where effective search engine optimization (SEO) can help.

Most savvy firms are using SEO techniques to ensure that their site appears near the top of search results at that magic moment when a prospect is actively looking for the services they provide. The efficiency of this type of marketing is hard to overstate. This ability to be found at the exact moment that your services are wanted frees you from the enormous cost and burden of poorly targeted marketing and lead generation activities. SEO allows leads to practically generate themselves—you can then spend your time closing new business rather than finding it.

SEO is an ongoing process that is part art and part science. Successful SEO is largely contingent on selecting the appropriate keywords, creating keyword-rich content, proper code structure, getting inbound links and measuring results.

- **Choose the right keywords and keyword phrases.** Imagine that you are a potential client in need of legal services. What would you type into the search engine query box? To get started with SEO, create an extensive keyword research report that addresses practice areas, attorney names, your geographic location and qualifying terms. Remember that one- and two-word phrases—such as “Virginia lawyer”—may drive a larger volume of traffic, but phrases with more than three words—such as “Richmond Virginia construction law attorney”—tend to drive more qualified traffic.
- **Create landing pages.** Once you have identified appropriate keyword phrases, it's time to optimize your site for them. In order to achieve high search engine rankings for these keyword phrases, you need to create pages that focus specifically on them. Dubbed “landing pages” because they are the pages that visitors land on when they visit your site as the result of a search, the purpose of these types of pages is to reassure the visitor that they've come to the right place and to get them to take a desired action. Up to 80% of the traffic on many marketing sites now bypasses the home page entirely and instead visitors are brought directly to optimized interior landing pages that relate directly to the search string they typed.

- **Get links—the right way.** Explore opportunities to generate links to your site. Search engines view sites with a large number of incoming links as trustworthy. Blogs, press releases and bylined articles that link to relevant content on your site are likely to boost your search engine rankings and traffic quality. Inbound links from .gov and .edu domains count the most, so pursue them first. But be leery of link exchange programs and other link scams that can actually have the opposite effect on how the search engines view your site.
- **Don't neglect the metrics.** Website metrics are the single most effective method of determining how effectively your site is meeting the needs of your users. Your website traffic generates reams of data regarding how users interact with your site and, more importantly, where there are opportunities for improvement. Understanding and interpreting that data presents both a formidable challenge and a wealth of opportunities.

Thankfully, the task of gathering and interpreting website metrics can be done automatically via web analytics software. Software like Google Analytics, WebTrends Analytics and LyrisHQ provide excellent insights and are easy to install, even on existing websites.

Take Advantage of New Media Opportunities

YouTube. Facebook. MySpace. Blogs. Chances are that the younger associates in your firm are using these tools daily even if you aren't. New media—including social networking sites and user-generated content—is dominating the search engine results. Smart marketers know that they must identify new media opportunities that enrich the firm's overall online marketing plan while staying true to the firm's brand. Every firm should have a new media strategy in place.

- **Blogs:** A weblog, or blog, is an excellent way for a firm to reach out to potential and existing clients while highlighting its associates' expertise. To create a successful blog, first identify its scope—what topics and information will the blog cover? Then, identify and recruit potential authors from within the firm, making sure to explain the benefits the blog will have for them individually and for the firm as a whole. Finally, create a posting schedule, and then edit posts in accordance with your organization's editorial style guide and to remove overly salesy content.

Get familiar with other blogs that cover similar topics in order to get an idea of what topics readers find the most interesting, and to forge relationships with other bloggers. The blogosphere is a community, so get involved. Respond to what you've read by using the blog's comment mechanism, or share information with your own readers by inserting a link to the content in your own blog posting.

- **Social networking sites:** Some social networking sites, such as LinkedIn, are geared at business professionals. Other social networking sites, such as MySpace, are geared more toward consumers. Then there are social networking sites like Facebook that blur the lines between personal and professional. When it comes to social networking opportunities, the best advice for professional service firms is to make use of social networking to the extent that it makes sense. Firms should have a social networking policy in place to guide employees through these decisions.

Certainly, business-focused sites like LinkedIn offer a valuable opportunity to connect with current and former colleagues and clients, as well as driving traffic back to the firm's website. But sites like MySpace and Facebook are probably better suited for personal rather than professional exploration—unless your firm is highly consumer-oriented or extremely cutting edge. Remind your associates that social networking sites tend to enjoy high search engine rankings, and some (like Facebook) offer full previews of user profiles, so associates should make sure they are comfortable with their profile information being shared with a much larger audience—including potential clients.

- **YouTube and online video:** Once considered a prohibitively expensive and time-consuming activity, creating a video presentation is now well within reach—and a potential shortcut to the top of the search engines results. When done well, video represents an unprecedented opportunity to bring your brand to life. Consider working with your firm's professionals to create short (2-5 minute) online videos that highlight their knowledge and expertise on a particular topic. Optimize your video title and description with appropriate keywords, and then post the video to YouTube and other video sharing sites.

Unprecedented Competition, Unprecedented Opportunity

Certainly, the marketplace is crowded, and competition is fierce. But savvy service firm marketers understand the unprecedented level of opportunity available today. The firms that will survive—and thrive—in this environment are those that understand that the old ways of marketing—filled with one-way communication, marketing hype and firm-focused messages—simply won't work anymore.

By building a strong online brand, shifting to client-centric communications, making it easy for prospects to find you online and engaging with social media wisely, your professional services firm is taking steps in the right direction. With a continued investment in and commitment to improving your online presence, you will be well on your way to turning a lackluster website into a lead generating machine.