



A Strategic Approach to Internet Marketing

by Kevin W. Brown

INTERNET MARKETING is now commonly utilized by many law firms, yet attorneys are often dissatisfied with the results or are unsure of what can realistically be expected. So, why the disappointment and confusion? The short answer is quite straight-forward: similar to other marketing efforts pursued by many law firms, internet marketing programs are often launched without a foundation built upon sound marketing strategy.

Does “One Size Really Fit All?”

Internet marketing has been proclaimed by some as “the best business-generation opportunity for lawyers” and by others as “the last, great frontier of legal marketing.” Are these statements true and applicable to your practice? What, if anything, should your firm do to take advantage of marketing opportunities via the Internet?

The premise that intensive Internet marketing is a catchall solution for all law firms is a conception based on the lack of a formal education in marketing strategy. The proponents of such concepts are typically companies that stand to make substantial profits off of those firms who are willing to accept their propositions. Ask these same companies about the marketing education of their “experts,” and you will generally find that they have little or no such education, much less experience in work-

ing with lawyers. Further, the field of internet marketing is replete with numerous service providers who know very little about marketing strategy, although they may have expertise in certain technological areas (such as website development).

As to whether Internet marketing is actually “the best business-generation opportunity for lawyers,” ask yourself “Could there possibly be one marketing technique that is effective for all firms, and all areas of law, for every market?” Of course not. A single technique could not possibly be appropriate for all markets because each market segment has different needs. However, Internet marketing can clearly be an effective marketing technique for many law firms, although the level of effectiveness is dependent upon marketing strategy in the design and implementation of the firm’s Internet marketing program.

The Critical Nature of Marketing Strategy

During speeches to groups of attorneys, I often point out that it is very easy to be busy in marketing but much harder to be productive. Marketing is the most diverse business discipline, allowing numerous avenues (even within internet marketing) to promote your firm and to seek new clients. However, selecting and implementing the correct marketing technique for your firm is far more difficult than simply trying something to see if it works. Although many law firms often ignore marketing strategy, it is critical for effective Internet marketing. Too often, law firms make the mistake of jumping into various marketing ideas without any true understanding of marketing fundamentals. It is therefore no wonder that the results can be disappointing.

Having served hundreds of firms and literally thousands of attorneys since the founding of my firm in 1991, I have always found that marketing strategy should always be integrated into virtually any and every marketing activity. Simplified, marketing strategy involves goals, objectives and an in-depth understanding of your targeted market and desired image within that market. Instead of just being busy in marketing, follow Brown’s Rule for Strategic Marketing: “*Know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how it will be done before you start your marketing efforts.*”

Whether you should apply significant

financial and human resources to an Internet marketing program should be based on sound strategy. So, first and foremost, hire a legal marketing expert (unless you have an employee with a degree in marketing and related experience) to work with your firm in developing an effective marketing strategy. Then you will be able to determine whether Internet marketing is the right choice for your firm and, if so, exactly what you should do to optimize your efforts. Alternatively, the most expensive Internet marketing efforts for law firms tend to be those that were created *without* a marketing strategy, not with one.

In developing your strategy, remember *Brown’s Basic Marketing Premise: “Marketing is based upon the Market.”* Your marketing activities should not be based upon the latest marketing trends but instead should focus on your firm’s goals in combination with the needs and wants of your targeted market. Also, be sure to consider how Internet marketing will fit in with the rest of your marketing efforts. It should not be done in isolation but instead as a cohesive component of your overall marketing program.

Your Targeted Market

Law firms are operating in an era of specialization. Businesses and individuals typically want an attorney or law firm that can demonstrate specific expertise in meeting a need. Focusing your services on the particular needs of your clients will be increasingly critical to the current and future success of your firm. This is where the concept of “targeted marketing” comes into play.

A target market is the “market segment” to which your firm’s services are marketed. Market segments are distinct subsets of the market that tend to have similar needs, characteristics or behavior patterns. For example, your employment litigation firm may be based in the Anaheim area and focuses on serving a targeted market of privately-owned businesses within a twenty-mile radius that have between 25 and 1,000 employees. Your firm may have multiple targeted markets, in which case it is best to use a matrix to prioritize them.

Through the process of market segmentation, your firm can more clearly develop an effective Internet marketing strategy. The internet is by its nature a “mass market” that gener-

ally should be segmented in order to more effectively target and reach those who might wish to secure your firm’s services. For most firms, with the right segmentation, you should be able to drastically improve your results over a “mass marketing” approach.

In contrast to targeted marketing, mass marketing promotes a firm to all businesses or individuals without any, or very limited, segmentation. Can mass marketing be a productive means of obtaining clients? For some firms the answer is “yes” on a limited scale, but certainly this is not the correct answer for all.

The Scope of Internet Marketing

Marketing, in its simplest form, is actually *everything your firm does in order to identify and satisfy the needs and wants of your “market”* (actual and potential clients for your services). It is understanding your market, adapting to meet its needs, effectively communicating your capabilities, selling your product or service, and serving your clients.

Marketing therefore encompasses a *very* broad spectrum. The functional areas of marketing include strategic marketing, competitive analysis, service/product development, pricing/fee strategies, advertising, publicity, public relations, promotion, sales and client service. As can be seen, marketing is actually far broader than many lawyers realize, who may have thought of it as limited to advertising or community relations.

Internet marketing is a form of marketing that can combine all or some of these functional areas of marketing. For example, a website is a marketing tool that can be used purely for communication purposes with existing clients and referral sources, or it can be used to generate inquiries into the firm’s services, help to promote the firm’s expertise *via* practice profiles or articles, and serve clients more effectively through specific web-based applications.

The key point is to realize that there are many available components to an effective internet marketing program. So how do you choose which components to use? The answer to this question is rather complicated but essentially involves an in-depth understanding of strategic marketing and knowledge of all options that may be appropriate for your firm’s specific circumstances.

While there are numerous internet mar-

keting methods for lawyers, below is an overview of some of the most common:

A Website for Everyone?

There was a time when websites were an optional marketing tool. For many firms, that is not the case anymore. Whereas ten years ago my firm had a minority of law firm clients with extensive websites, we now are active on a weekly basis in writing, designing and updating websites. Depending on the needs and buying patterns of your targeted market, a website may be essential for effective marketing. For example, if your targeted market will research your firm's capabilities before hiring a lawyer, you need a website. On the other hand, if your clients and referral sources do not access the internet and will rarely if ever enter your website, it may be less than useful.

Your strategic marketing plan should support your reasons for having a website. What are some of the common reasons to have a website? While there are many, it is important that the rationale is applicable to your firm. Here are some factors to consider:

- It acts as a *stamp of credibility* for those who research your firm. A quality website should project the same level of expertise as your firm's rendering of services. Conversely, many potential buyers will consider your firm less sophisticated for not having a website or for having poorly written website content.
- *It is a multi-faceted marketing tool.* A website can be an electronic brochure, publicity campaign, and advertising vehicle, all wrapped up in one comprehensive yet cohesive package. For clients alone, a website can be an information conduit, client information and resource center, and marketing communication tool for your services.
- *Your targeted market may expect it.* If many of your competitors are meeting the market's needs in this manner, you do not want to be left behind.
- *It is easily accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week.* This may be particularly useful if your clients tend to be located in another time zone, work at unusual hours, or are typically individual consumers of legal services.
- *Web sites are a relatively inexpensive way to build relationships* between your firm and clients.
- Prospective clients and referral sources like the fact that a web site provides a *non-threatening method to check out your firm.*

- Since legal services are intangible, prospective clients have to rely upon various *manifestations of quality and value*, which a web site can communicate. There are numerous methods for your firm to demonstrate its differentiating characteristics.

- A website can be a *useful recruiting tool*, providing easily accessible information and acting as an indicator of your firm's progressiveness.

- *It can be easily updated on a cost-effective basis.* If you add a new practice area or an attorney leaves your firm, changing your website is far less expensive than printing new collateral materials.

Keys to website development include marketing strategy, integration of branding



and positioning strategies, effectively written content, and ease-of-navigation. Measuring the success of a website is subjective to each firm. For some, the "conversion rate" (percentage of prospects who view your website and become clients) is a key indicator. Many firms simply need a website presence that can be referenced by a targeted market, without expectations that the website will generate business in and of itself.

Search Engine Listings

On many occasions attorneys have told me that they were informed by an "expert" that ranking high on a search engine listing (such as Google) is critical to success in internet mar-

keting. Almost invariably this "expert's" sole expertise is in website development but not in marketing strategy. If you are convinced that search engine rankings are critical, ask yourself this question: Will my target market use this listing in order to find and select my firm? If the answer is an unqualified "yes," then you should consider active efforts to maintain a high ranking on major search engines utilized by your targeted market.

Directories

If you are convinced that your targeted market will utilize directories to find your firm, then these can be a very useful tool. For example, general counsel at Fortune 500 companies may peruse www.martindale.com to find a Southern California law firm whose specialty will best serve the needs of their California subsidiary. Without the investment in developing a well-written Martindale listing, this law firm may have never gained the opportunity to earn a highly valuable new client. Some directories are free, others are costly – there are literally hundreds available.

E-Newsletters

An E-newsletter can be a very powerful Internet marketing tool, especially when integrated with a website. Some newsletter readers will review it in detail, others will scan it, while some will just note whom it came from and not have the time to read it. All are marketing opportunities in varying degrees.

Advertising and Sponsorships

Within many targeted markets, there are often numerous websites that act as resources for your prospects and referral sources. Many of these offer advertising and sponsorship opportunities. In some cases, this may be an effective method of obtaining new business for your firm. Examples include "banner" ads, directory ads, and organization sponsorships. The OCBA, for example, is currently offering advertising opportunities for its 2007 on-line directory. Does your firm obtain a substantial amount of business from other attorneys? Will these attorneys use the OCBA on-line directory to find a colleague to whom they can refer business? If your answer is "yes" to these questions, this advertising opportunity could be a very successful investment for your firm.

Article Publicity

Over the years I have written dozens of nationally- and locally-published articles in printed publications. Many of these have ended up on the Internet, and I regularly receive inquiries based on the expertise demonstrated in the content. I also have written articles exclusively for the Internet. Similarly, if any of your attorneys could publish such articles and your firm would benefit from the publicity, consider adding this to your Internet marketing efforts.

Blogs, Podcasts and Webinars

As technology develops, marketing methods develop with it. Some of the more recent Internet marketing techniques include:

- **Blogs** – A “blog” (derived from “web log”) is a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blogs can be useful in reaching niche markets that are well-served in Internet usage. However, blogs are time-intensive to maintain. Cost/benefit issues should be carefully evaluated before initiating a blog.
- **Podcasts** — A “podcast” is a media file that is distributed by subscription (paid or unpaid) over the internet using syndication feeds for playback on mobile devices and personal computers. A podcast is distinguished from other digital audio formats by its ability to be downloaded automatically.
- **Webinars** – A “webinar” is a seminar conducted over the web, as a type of web conferencing. As compared to a webcast (one-way transmission), a webinar is interactive between the presenter and audience.

As with other Internet marketing methods, the key in selecting these and other newer techniques is how it interfaces with your services and the needs of your targeted market.

Tying It All Together

Within the last five years, the level of activity among law firms in utilizing the Internet to market their firms has increased substantially. Many of these firms initialized these efforts because their competitors were doing so, some because they saw an opportunity to differentiate themselves, while others were convinced to do so due to the influence of someone involved in the field of Internet marketing. What is all too often lacking in this process is the development of a sound

marketing strategy. A far more productive use of your time and money is to develop a clear, logical strategy that will incorporate your Internet program with other firm marketing activities.



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