

For Attorneys and Clients, the Internet Is the Great Equalizer

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By Michael N. Mercurio

Not long ago, hiring an attorney was a lot like visiting a doctor. If you needed legal help, you would drive to your local law office. The building's windows or signage would be emblazoned with two words: "Law Office," often lacking identifying names or law firm branding. You would check in with a receptionist, pour yourself a cup of coffee, and wait in the lobby for the next available appointment. When the attorney was ready to see you, he—and it was almost always a he—would call you into his office, you would explain your situation, and the attorney would either offer advice, schedule a follow-up, or refer you to a colleague with specialized knowledge.

As quaint as that may sound, it still reflects reality in some small towns. Moreover, the image of the local law office—a community's elemental, all-purpose legal resource—continues to shape lawyers' practices everywhere. Many modern-day firms cling to the notion that clients are a given and that presence alone will generate business. They think of themselves as essential services first and brands second.

But where healthcare industry regulations effectively preclude any marketing effort on the part of a doctor's office, the legal industry is relatively unhindered. And the technological developments brought by the 21st century—namely, the rise of the internet and social media—give attorneys and firms unprecedented opportunities to compete for clients' business.

The internet and social media have democratized the field both for people seeking legal assistance and those providing it. To borrow from an old adage, God may have made lawyers, but Google made them equal. Today, someone looking for a mergers and acquisitions attorney, for example, can simply type "m&a attorney" into their search bar and immediately browse listings of practices and firms in their area, along with guides on choosing the best lawyer for the job. One doesn't need to rely on connections or blind faith to access a qualified legal advisor.

It is, therefore, essential for lawyers to proactively market their firms and differentiate themselves online. If you don't use the internet and social media to attract clients' and prospects' attention, a competitor will. At the same time, attorneys must contend with self-service, on-demand legal providers, such as LegalZoom, who ostensibly offer greater convenience at a lower cost.

Fortunately, it's possible for any attorney and any firm to stand out, establish credibility, and build trust with clients and prospects. All it takes is commitment, strategic planning, and a few hours per week.

First, you need to develop marketing content related to your practice and interests. Content serves multiple purposes, from education to branding to lead generation and networking. Indeed, it's at the core of nearly every marketing strategy. Blog posts, articles, videos, podcasts, and infographics are all great ways to drive traffic, cultivate an audience, and start conversations. For attorneys and firms, the type of content matters less than its consistency and authenticity.

Next, find ways to distribute that content and amplify its reach online. This is where social media comes into play. LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks provide means to connect with a target market, share information and links, and forge relationships with influencers—i.e., people well-positioned to broadcast your message to larger audiences. (Keep in mind that social media is one channel of many; email newsletters, for instance, remain as effective a form of content distribution as ever.)

In addition to content creation and distribution, firms and attorneys can employ a number of digital marketing tactics to outrank their competitors. Through search engine optimization (SEO), you can boost your website and content's visibility for visitors searching for specific keywords. Online advertising and paid search (e.g., via Google AdWords) also make a difference—and a small investment can go a long way.

To succeed, these initiatives must complement and flow from a group's overall business strategy. At my firm, for instance, our content development and distribution platform is part of a larger, ongoing effort to create relationships with and provide value to business owners. The internet and social media don't replace in-person meetings and handshakes, but technology does empower us to more fully and consistently connect with the right clients. It's the difference between passively assuming the role of generalized "law office" and actively leading with the singular skills, knowledge, and perspective you and your team bring.

And digital marketing is critical for attracting not only clients and prospects but recent law school graduates and lateral hires as well. Attorneys pay attention to your firm's marketing efforts, and if those efforts don't support their practices and goals, they'll look for positions elsewhere.

In an era of choice, the onus is on us to guide people toward the best decisions for themselves, their families, and their organizations. In that respect, at least, the legal business hasn't changed.

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