

# The ABCs of SEO (Search Engine Optimization)

by Sharon D. Nelson



Once your law firm has invested in a website, how do you draw traffic to it? How do you position it so it appears high in a search engine's list?

You do it with search engine optimization. The following are questions frequently asked about SEO.

## **Which search engine should we optimize for?**

Google. Compete.com reports that in November 2007 Google commanded 68.9 percent of the market share, and received almost four times the number of queries as the runner-up, Yahoo.

## **Do we lose anything by optimizing specifically for Google and not other engines?**

Doubtful. Google-optimized sites seem to show up just fine in other search engines.

## **How does Google rank websites?**

Only Google knows. The algorithm it uses is protected as fiercely as the formula for Coke. Nonetheless, those who study rankings have a reasonably good idea of what works and what does not. Here are the elements we at Sensei think are most important, pretty much in order of priority:

- **Page title**—Include your name and keywords that potential clients will use when searching for you.
- **Site content**—The deeper and broader, the better. Keywords count, but never "stuff" them. Use as many as permissible within the bounds of graceful writing and delivery of useful information.
- **Content on the home page**—This is the most important factor to Google. Some theorize that hyperlinked content and page subtitles are given additional weight.

- **Inbound links**—How many high-quality sites link to you? How do they link? By firm name only? By keyword text? This is also one of the hardest things to achieve, especially for solo practitioners and small firms, whose sites are mainly promotional. Their inbound links are paid links from directories, which count, but are given far less weight. For quality links, you have to have content that gives someone a reason to link to you.

- **Domain name**—If someone is searching for baby gifts and you are babygifts.com, you have a definite edge, but it is only one factor, and certainly not the major one.

- **Currency**—Sites that are not updated vanish quickly from the top rankings. Herein lies the problem for most law firms, which let sites wither untended, except for minor alterations.

- **Age**—This factor was probably introduced by Google as a way of letting new sites "stew" for a bit to sift out scammers who fold their tents and disappear when the law comes after them.

## **Can companies really get you quickly to the top of the search results, as they promise in their ads?**

Search engine optimization is a long, hard process. It takes time to cultivate a site that will get to the top of the rankings. Some folks who promise the moon try to cheat the system. For example, they may have the site listed at phony sites that exist as a bank of links to boost the apparent popularity of a website. Or they use white-on-white text on the home page to list keywords over and over, invisible to the human eye but picked up by

the spider robots that crawl websites for the search engines. Google and the other engines penalize or ban sites that use these devices. The seamy side of the SEO industry constantly tries new gambits. They succeed only briefly before they are sniffed out and penalized.

## **Does competition hurt the chances for a high ranking?**

Absolutely. If you practice, say, aviation law in Fairfax, you may vault to the top quickly. But a small divorce law firm in Fairfax is unlikely to have a site that is both broad and deep. Most users will use geography and area of law to search (e.g., "divorce lawyer" and "Fairfax Virginia"), and there are many divorce lawyers in Fairfax. The competition for ranking in this case is severe.

This is precisely where SEO can help. But it would be a mistake to expect overnight success. This is definitely a case where "slow and steady wins the race."

## **How do I go about SEO?**

First determine who your prospective clients might be. What age? What gender? What income level? What are their "pain points" that you can touch? Are you in search of clients from the public or referrals from colleagues? Once you have a profile in mind, you can work on figuring out graphics that will hook site visitors and text that will keep their attention and convert them to clients or to lawyers who want to refer clients. Creativity is key. Don't use stock graphics—no courthouses, gavels, or law books. Nothing that smacks of being a cookie-cutter site. If you practice criminal defense, you might want to show a good photo of someone being arrested or handcuffed. That's a photo that your potential clients can identify with.

### **Which keywords are most valuable?**

There is an excellent tool to help you figure this out. It is called Wordtracker and is available at <http://www.wordtracker.com>. It is subscription-based: one year costs \$329, one month \$59, and one week \$30. You may be just fine with using it for a week if you are diligent in devising keywords, studying the results, and perhaps revising the keywords to see what that does to the Wordtracker results. Look at your competitors' sites for ideas for keywords, which usually are phrases, not single words.

### **How do you broaden and deepen your site for better SEO?**

This takes time and dogged work. Decide what content will appeal to site visitors. They will appreciate information on your area of law—articles and news blurbs are great. They will like case digests. Frequently asked questions are always popular. Never underestimate the power of blogs, though you should make sure you can muster the time to provide regular and quality content for a blog. Choose carefully, picking material that has the most allure for site visitors and that you know you can maintain.



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### **How do law firms stay on top of SEO?**

If you're big enough to have in-house marketing and website design/SEO, you are blessed. Some smaller firms have marketing committees that track SEO on a regular basis. But you might want to outsource this function. Because the Google algorithm changes so much, it is probably a good idea to have your site reviewed for optimization at least annually. Once it's been done right to begin with, the updates should be considerably more modest in cost.

### **Are you an alcoholic?**

An alcoholic is always searching, usually daily, on keywords to check his site's Google ranking. Resist the temptation. If you check it no more than

quarterly, you won't need a twelve-step program for your addiction.

You might be able to do SEO yourself. We at Sensei learned it ourselves, became proficient at it, and now receive about 20 percent of our business from the website. But if you don't have the time (and how many busy lawyers do?) get a professional to assist. Lawyers ask constantly what single investment they can make to help grow their practice and our answer is always the same: Invest in a first-class creative website and pay attention to the ABCs of SEO.