

DIGITAL MARKETING FOR SMALL PRACTICES

By 2010 Australians were spending an average of 22 hours a week online. It's little wonder then that brands are focusing more and more attention on using online as a medium for getting their message across.

The relatively low cost of digital marketing also makes it a realistic method for small practices like yours to engage with an audience and potentially build business. But because digital is the most interactive (and least controllable) of all media, getting your digital advertising wrong can be disastrous. So before you start out it pays to know the basics of digital marketing.

Managing your online presence

In the old days people who needed a solicitor usually asked for a recommendation from someone they trusted. Now things are different. While word of mouth is still vital, the World Wide Web has become a wealth of information on pretty much everything, including you.

Even if you have already been recommended to a potential client the first thing they'll often do is to Google you. So what will people come across when they plug you or your firm's name into a search engine? And what will they find if they search for "lawyer + [your speciality] + [your suburb/town]"?

Hopefully the first result that should appear is your firm's website.

Making your site work

Marketing is based on the principle of finding a point of differentiation in your product compared to that of your competitors and then doing your best to promote it. Many firms have taken this to heart by using their site to tell potential clients how differently they do things. But is that really the best strategy? While your personality should shine through in everything you do, your clients would probably prefer to know you're a professional rather than an individual.

Your site should stand out for its simplicity and professionalism. Give potential clients the information they want in a way that's easy to find and, just as importantly, easy to read. Forget fancy designs or long-winded marketing spiels and instead:

- Present yourself professionally. Your design should be crisp rather than cutting edge (leave frames back in the 1990s) and should reflect the fact that your job is an important one.
- Don't overcomplicate things. Make sure your site is easy to navigate and flows logically. Make sure it's easy to search your site if you intend to blog or post articles (see below).
- Let people know how to contact you (you'd be surprised how often this is overlooked). In fact, you should have your contact details in the footer at the bottom of every page.
- Tell people what you do. Let prospective clients know what you specialise in and, if you do have the skills they're after, why they should go with you. That means having a solid "About us" or "Our Services" page which outlines your skills and experience without embellishment.
- Write for your audience. Keep your language simple and avoid legal jargon. Clients don't talk in words like "notwithstanding" and "accordingly". You shouldn't either.

Content is King

Your content – specifically the words you include on your site and to some extent how often you use them – goes some way to determining where your site ranks when people plug search terms into an engine. Using this technique to divert people to your site is known as search engine optimisation (SEO).

One of the easiest and best ways to make sure a site ‘ranks highly’ in response to a search query is by continually updating your content with relevant information. This should include blogging or posting articles about information that is likely to relate to what prospective clients are searching for. For instance, if you specialise in commercial leasing and would like to attract the attention of people looking for a commercial leasing lawyer, you should blog about specific dilemmas they’re likely to face (without, of course, giving advice).

If you take the blogging path there’s a few things you should remember:

- Your clients aren’t lawyers. Don’t write in legal jargon (see above). Avoid any technical terms unless you can also explain them in simple language.
- Everything you put out there stays out there. Don’t be afraid to have an opinion, especially if your clients will be interested. But make sure you’re on firm ground.
- Learn to write all over again. Writing for the web isn’t like writing a legal essay or opinion. People generally don’t want to read vast tracts of text or long sentences. Set out your information simply using short sentences and bullet points.

Lawyering and social media

Probably the area of digital marketing most talked about, and least understood, is social media. It has become fashionable for companies to jump on social media and tweet (through Twitter) or have a Facebook page. However, many, including some of the biggest brands, have failed to give proper consideration to what they’re doing. Social media is a two-way street. Just ask Qantas or Bing Lee.

Twitter

Some misguided law firms have decided that Twitter is a great way to remind people of what it is they do. They tweet: “[InsertFirmName] is an [insertspecialty] law firm in [inserttown], call [insertnumber] and see us today”. What a waste of time.

To use Twitter correctly you need to start following like-minded people and contributing to discussions, that way you can become ‘part of the conversation’ and potentially build your reputation.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn bills itself as the world’s largest professional network, boasting more than 120 million members across the globe. It’s used to connect with peers and exchange ideas and knowledge in a professional environment. Once you’ve set up your LinkedIn profile a good place to start your journey might be the Law Society of NSW Group. You can also join (or even start) groups for people sharing similar experiences or with similar interests to yourself.

Making the most of email

Email may lack the glamour of social media but it is probably more underestimated than any form of electronic marketing (and more directly relevant to building your client base). An email newsletter can be a cheap, simple way of letting your clients know the range of what you do, giving you an opportunity to convert them into more regular clients. It can also be a regular way of staying in contact with clients and letting them know you're still out there while providing something useful.

Email newsletters present their own unique challenges.

- You need data. If you don't have your clients' email addresses on file, get them now. An email out to your list is a cheaper and more efficient way to get a message across than using phone or print.
- Recipients need to open emails for them to be effective. The good news on this front is that your clients are already more likely to open an email that comes from their lawyer than from most companies competing for their attention (as long as you don't earn a reputation as a 'spammer' by emailing them too frequently). You also need to make sure you comply with relevant legislation.
- Your newsletter needs to be written for your clients. Like writing for the web, this means writing in plain English and avoiding jargon. It also means making the subject matter of any articles relevant to your audience.
- Give the reader a reason to contact you. Each story you include in a newsletter should have a strong call to action so that your clients contact you if they face similar challenges. And that also means having your contact details prominently displayed.

Tracking for success

One of the best features of digital media is that pretty much everything you do is trackable. By using Google Analytics you can find out who's visiting your website, find out how they are getting there and even find out what information they're reading.

Email marketing software like Campaign Monitor and MailChimp lets you do the same for email newsletters, giving you precise figures on how many people on your mail list opened each email and what they clicked on.

Unlike traditional methods of marketing, you really can get a sense of what's working and what's not and adjust your strategy accordingly.