The Rise of Distributed Publishing

Steve Matthews | July 2012

It's a fundamental marketing decision for many law firms: How much content should we publish outside our website? For many years, the answer always seemed to be: none. Firms tried to serve and address every audience and every interest in one location. The predictable result was an incredibly cluttered website, both in its message and in its presentation.

The law firm website was never intended to be a single-subject, single-audience, publishing powerhouse. Fortunately, many firms have realized this and have wised up. Over the last decade, we've seen the rapid transfer of "commentary" from firm websites, pushing that content outward to other online locations in order to gain better exposure. I call this "distributed publishing", a term I probably didn't coin, but first started using at ABA TECHSHOW back in March.

Distributed publishing is all about developing carefully targeted, highly relevant, single-subject websites that respond to the interests of a law firm's clientele (or potential clientele). Blogs, microsites, and topic portals are all examples of publishing initiatives that fall under the distributed publishing model.

For a host of reasons discussed in this column, firms can create a clearer message by building these sorts of content-focused "destinations". Search engines understand the intended topic of publication better, while audiences are directed to a subject- or issue-dedicated website to which they might actually be interested in returning.

Many firms invest significant time, effort and money in their websites, and that's a step in the right direction [http://www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog/2012/law-firm-websites-are-the-foundation/]. But unless your firm is a single-service boutique practice, there's a good chance your website already addresses too many audiences with different interests.

Smart firms with diverse practices realize the necessity of strategically expanding their publishing beyond the firm website by establishing a distributed publishing model. They isolate each target audience's commentary on a dedicated website, with the authorship (and marketing message) closely tied to a single sponsoring industry group or practice group or two. The firm website remains the hub, but it's the blogs, microsites, and portals extending from that hub that establish the powerful, interlinked network of the firm's online presence.

Sounds like a lot of work, right? Well, yes, it is — but it's worth it! Google richly rewards single-subject focused websites, and here are a few reasons why:

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- Single-subject websites often embed subject-targeted keywords within their domain names, chosen to accurately fit the topical theme of the website.

- They repeatedly apply the consistent subject theme within each webpage's title tag in the underlying page code — a factor still heavily weighed by the search engines.

- They reinforce this hyper-focus on a single topic with a network of incoming links that originate from similar websites — often publishing on the exact same topics.

Add in the social networking benefits, and you can start to see why blogs have become a cornerstone of legal web marketing over the past six to eight years. The outward-bound signals of these sites, from a search engine's perspective, are incredibly strong.

Besides audience segmentation, there are many other advantages of maintaining a wider digital footprint including:

- Increased search engine visibility, exposing content to new audiences and building readership;

- A stronger connection to practice group or industry group branding;

- The elevation of important and timely content to the most prominent positioning on the content website's homepage — all the reader needs to remember is the domain name, creating easier navigation and repeat visitors;

- Each website's target audience is directed to the most appropriate practice page on the firm website — since the firm owns both web properties, it can establish this type of linking relationship between websites; and

- Tight subject-focused links between the content website and the practice page help increase search-engine rankings for the recipient practice group webpage.

With a growing number of firms moving towards this niche-subject, audience-focused approach, you might now be wondering whether it's even possible for a law firm website to compete for top search engine rankings? It is, but unless the firm in question is operating from an aged domain with thousands of authoritative incoming links, it won't be easy. For many smaller firms, a subject-focused publication on a dedicated domain might be their best chance to compete with larger competitors.

Fortunately, there are a number of methods to accomplish this. If I've convinced you that distributed publishing is the way to go, stay tuned.… I'll be kicking off a series next week at Law Firm Web Strategy [http://www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog/] that gives specific advice on tactics to diversify your firm's web publishing.

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