

SEO Tactics That Are Worth Your Time in 2013

Steve Matthews | July 2013

Look at any list of current SEO strategies and it will be immediately clear that the #1 tactic relates to content. In my last column on law firm SEO tactics to avoid in 2013 [<http://www.slaw.ca/2013/02/27/law-firm-seo-tactics-to-avoid-in-2013/>], I concluded that more than anything else, we need to ensure a “regular flow of original content (and deep links flowing into that content)” and to “make good choices: on publishing, building audiences, coding, classification, proper description, and most important, connecting with people.”

I stand by those words. The bottom line is that content drives search traffic; this has never been truer than in 2013. Beyond the publishing of useful, targeted, and high-quality content, though, there are still some behind-the-scenes aspects of SEO that shouldn't be overlooked.

Clean Up Your (Google Places) Act

In what many web folks are hoping is the light at the end of a very long and treacherous tunnel, Google recently announced [http://googleandyourbusiness.blogspot.ca/2013/04/improving-look-and-feel-of-google_2.html] that it has begun to roll out an improved dashboard [<http://searchengineland.com/google-upgrades-google-places-dashboard-154372>] for business owners to administer their Google Places for Business pages. Google promises that the new dashboard is easier to use (which wouldn't take much); that changes made through the new dashboard will go live sooner; and ultimately, that there will be better integration with other Google products such as local Google+ pages, AdWords Express, and Google Offers. Business owners will receive an email when the new dashboard is available to them – but only time will tell whether this is truly an improvement over the current setup.

It's surprising how many law firms haven't got “the basics” right yet. Ensure your Places business listing is claimed, filled out and accurate. Consistent descriptions for “the NAP” (firm name, address, and phone number) are critical, along with your website URL, contact email, categories and description, hours of operation, payment options, languages of service, and confirmed location of the pin marker on Google Maps. You'll get extra mileage out of adding photos and videos, as well.

Firms will also want to consider merging their Places record with their corresponding Google+ local

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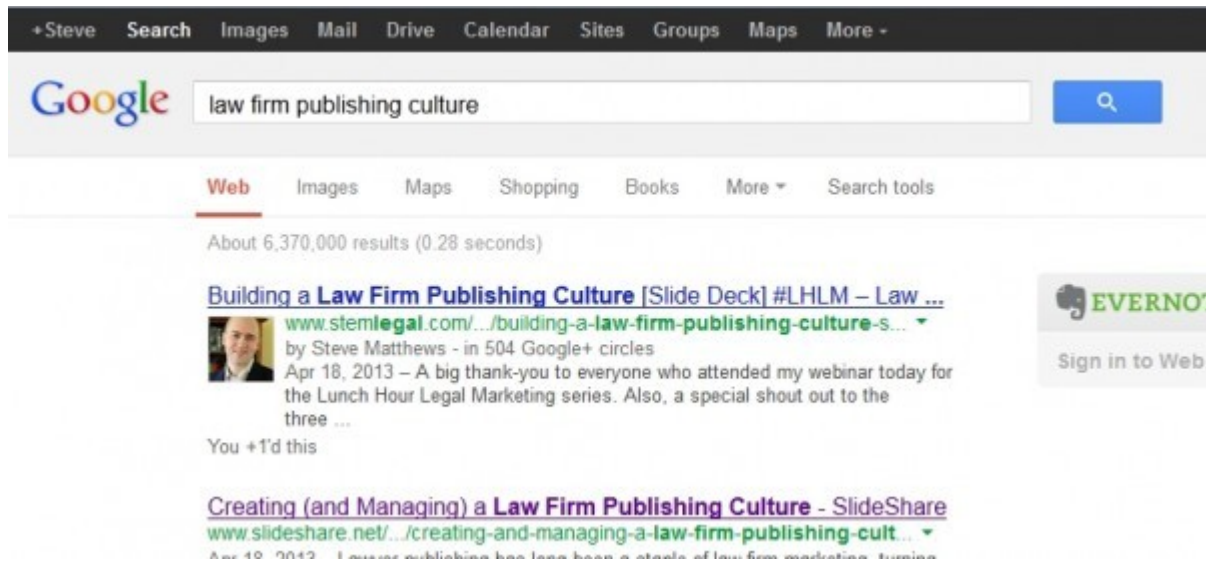
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pages. If your firm is already sharing news and blog posts, photos and videos, etc. on Google’s social network, it’s well worth your time to connect that engagement with your local business listing.

Stake Your Authorship Claim

Ever notice how sometimes you’ll see small author headshots next to their content in a page of Google search results?



This is thanks to Google’s Authorship markup. But what are the practical benefits? For starters, users have reported that implementing Authorship markup results in higher clickthrough rates, and recent research agrees.

Matt Green and John Van Bockern of Ethical SEO Consulting wanted to know the impact of media snippets on clickthrough rates [http://blumenthals.com/blog/2013/03/13/video-snippets-vs-author-images/] in search engines, and determined which factors were most important for consumers searching for a personal injury lawyer. There were two very interesting conclusions: First, having any media snippet next to your search record will produce a greater number of click-throughs; and second, “authorship snippets” actually had a higher click-through than “video snippets”.

In Copyblogger’s list of 10 reasons why writers should claim their Google Authorship markup [http://www.copyblogger.com/claim-google-authorship/], trust-building is cited as another key benefit.

“The recognition that you have a Google+ account and a headshot beside your search listing is going to separate you from the faceless content creators. David Gould said it best: “For users, this reinforces the idea that the result is reputable: this link isn’t just the result

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of robotic SEO manipulation, but rather it's from a human being who we can learn more about. Knowing that at least some minimal verification has gone on creates a trust factor with the user.”

Setting up Authorship is fairly straightforward. Each author needs a Google+ profile, a byline on the website embedded next to the author's content (and that matches your Google+ profile name), and a high-quality headshot. Once these things are in place, there are two ways to verify the claim [<http://support.google.com/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=1408986&expand=2&hl=en>]: the author either needs to have an email address from the domain on which their content is hosted, or needs to set up reciprocal links to and from their Google+ profile.

Authorship markup is proving itself to be a powerful search signal — and one that's entirely within the reach and control of individual authors. Smart lawyers will take full advantage of it.

Mobile Visibility

Mobile considerations are a particularly hot topic in the web world these days — and for good reason, considering how commonplace tablets [<http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Tablet-Ownership-2013.aspx>] and smartphones are. While it shouldn't take a Google directive [<http://lawyerist.com/smartphone-website-mistakes-can-hurt-search-visibility/>] to push law firms to employ a responsive web design, Google does factor “mobile friendliness” as a quality signal that can impact “how search results are delivered”.

The search impact aside, let's review things a little further. Why else should you employ a mobile responsive design? Two factors worth your consideration:

- **Simplifying Contact:** What happens when potential clients try to find you on their phones or tablets? Responsive designs help firm websites make it easy for clients to make contact — through clear and eye-catching calls to action, yes, but also through touchable telephone numbers and email addresses (using the tel: and mailto: schemes).
- **Don't neglect the principle of content parity** [<http://bradfrostweb.com/blog/mobile/content-parity/>]. Web designer Brad Frost says: “It's a myth that mobile users don't want to do everything that desktop users do.” So go ahead and optimize the format of your various content-types. Just don't alter the delivery, or make content unavailable.

Even massive website traffic is useless if visitors aren't able to quickly find what they need when they arrive at your site. This is especially true for mobile users, and worth considering when designing your “user experience”. Someone on a smartphone, for example, is more likely to be en route to your office and needing directions. Highlighting information like this on smaller-screen devices ... that's just simple common sense.

Google thinks so, too. Search engines have always looked to measure website quality, and a part of that process is gauging whether a website “works” for its users. Google can detect those qualities within your website's code, so law firms should expect their websites to be measured against those

signals.

Conclusion

Even among many law firms today, there's an unfortunate and outdated understanding of "what SEO is". Few people think "SEO" when they hear about faster delivery of web content, or responsive design for mobile devices, or linking published content with authorship markup, or syncing up a firm's numerous local business listings. These are, however, very common issues that currently define a law firm's relationship with Google. For firms looking to maximize their search exposure in 2013, many will do well to consider how they are "feeding" the three inputs above.

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