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The Top 10 SEO Best Practices For Law Firm Websites

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I. Introduction – Why Does SEO Matter?

Search engines are a major source of traffic to law firm websites (as well as law firm blogs). Generally, the higher up a law firm website "ranks" in the search engines, the more prospective clients will visit the site. And the more prospects visit a site, the more leads will be generated. Therefore, a law firm seeking to maximize the number of leads generated by its website should follow "best practices" when it comes to search engine optimization, or SEO.

According to Wikipedia, SEO is "the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a web site from search engines via 'natural' search results for targeted keywords." SEO accomplishes this objective via design, copywriting, and coding techniques that maximize the accessibility of your site content to search engine spiders crawling your site to accurately index it within the search engine's database.

> *By following SEO "best practices", you make it easier for search engines to do their job, and they will reward you with higher rankings in their search results.*

Why do search engines want to accurately categorize your site? The popularity of individual search engines (and hence their advertising revenue) depends on their displaying the most relevant and accurate search results to search engine users. If search engines understand what your website is about then links to it can be displayed in response to appropriate search queries. By following SEO "best practices," you make it easier for search engines to do their job, and they will reward you with higher rankings in relevant search results.

This white paper will review the top 10 law firm website SEO best practices. The "best practices" are divided into two types – "pre-launch" best practices implemented while your website is being designed and coded, and "post-launch" best practices to follow after your website has launched.

II. Pre-Launch Best Practices

#1: Compose Unique, Accurate, and Catchy Meta Title and Description Tags

The meta title and description tags are pieces of descriptive text in a website's source code that describe each page of your website. While not visible on the website itself, they are accessible to search engine spiders to help them understand what a particular web page is about.

> *The title tag has been called of the most important factors in achieving high search engine rankings.*

SEO Angle: The content in title and description tags strongly influences search engines in terms of deciding how high up in search results to display a web page in response to a particular query. Google stresses the importance of title and description tags that are not just descriptive, but unique for each page on your website. Additionally, a recent poll of 72 SEO experts by SEOMoz (a leading SEO resource portal) found that keyword use in the title tag (especially in the beginning of the title tag) was the most important "on page" ranking factor.

Accordingly, it is a best practice to compose unique title and meta description tags for each page on your website using targeted keywords that accurately reflect the content on the page. This helps maximize the likelihood that the page will be displayed as high as possible in search results in response to a relevant search query. Conversely, it is poor practice to use

identical copy in all of the title and description tags for your website. The search engines view this as duplicate content and it may hurt rankings.

Good website management software (also known as content management software, or "CMS") makes it easy for site administrators to customize title and description tag copy for individual site pages before publishing those pages to the Internet.

Marketing Angle: Title and description tags also directly influence the percentage of searchers who will click a link to your website when displayed in a search result. That is because Google and other search engines display the title and description tag for web pages in search results. The title tag generally serves as the text in the hyperlink back to the web page displayed in a search result, while the description tag is generally displayed under the hyperlink to provide users with a better understanding of what the destination page is about.

Because they are displayed to search engine users, well-written, catchy title and description tags can boost the percentage of searchers who click through to your website from search engines. Conversely, poorly written (e.g., vague, incomprehensible) title and description tags discourage searchers from clicking through to your website, and thus squander the benefit of high search engine rankings.

Illustrating the above principles, please see below two search results generated by Google for the keyphrases "law firm email marketing." Note the hyperlinked title tag text, and the description tag text below composed with the goal of converting these results into clickthroughs.

#2: Use Targeted Keywords in Visible Page Text

Search engines evaluate the mix of all the words on a web page to determine what a page is about. As such, it is important to use targeted keywords as much as possible in the body copy on a page as well.

At the same time, indiscriminately stuffing a page with targeted keywords is not a good idea. In fact, search engines may penalize you for doing so since they may interpret it as "spamming." Poorly written copy will also turn off visitors. The copy on a page should make sense to the average reader of the page.

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To determine the optimal keywords to insert into visible page content, as well as title and description tags, a firm may want to conduct keyword research. Briefly, the goal of keyword research is to identify keywords that will have the greatest positive impact on your website's search engine visibility when used in site copy and title and description tags.

The Keyword Efficiency Index, or KEI, is one popular formula that can be used to measure the SEO impact of individual keywords. KEI compares the frequency with which a keyword is used in search queries to the number of competing sites using that keyword. The higher the KEI, the better the keyword.

The literal quantity of indexable content on a page can also be a factor in search engine rankings. Each page on your website doesn't need to have a lot of content, but it should have some.

While Google has made great progress in indexing content in Flash files, the general consensus remains that Flash files are less search-engine friendly than HTML text files. Thus, a site seeking optimal search-engine rankings should make sure to include HTML text on its pages in addition to any Flash.

#3: Enclose Targeted Keywords in H1 and Other Tags

The H1 tag is a headline tag intended to summarize the topic of a particular page. As such, search engines often use this tag to determine relevancy.

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One problem with the H1 tag is that in default mode, it displays as a large font size, and thus text enclosed within H1 tags looks huge and unappealing. The solution is to use style sheets to control how text enclosed in H1 tags displays.

Nevertheless, because the H1 tag is a high level thematic signal, it should only be used sparingly on any individual page. Overuse can be detrimental and may appear as "spamming."

Some SEO experts also recommend discretely enclosing keywords in other tags such as bold, italics and H2 and H3 header tags.

#4: Use Targeted Keywords in Image ALT Tags

The ALT tag is a tag associated with images that describes what the image is about when you hover your mouse over the image. Search engine spiders can't read the copy in an image, but they can read the ALT text associated with an image.

Additionally, when crawling a link from one web page to another web page (the "destination page"), Google utilizes the text comprising the link (a/k/a the "anchor text") to determine what the destination page is about. When an image is used as a link, the ALT tag functions as its "anchor text."

Finally, ALT tags can occasionally drive traffic from image searches on Google and elsewhere.

#5: Update Website Pages Frequently

Search engines like to see frequent site updates since this means the content is fresh, and therefore probably more relevant. For this reason it is helpful for the homepage of a website to feature dynamically generated internal links to new content recently posted elsewhere on the site (e.g., new announcements, resources, articles, etc.). These dynamically generated links also help with internal linking (see best practice #6 below).

Good content management software makes it easy for even non-technical users to update a website frequently with new content.

#6: Engage in Internal Linking on the Website With Appropriate Anchor Text

Since Google and other search engines crawl the links on each page of your website (starting with the homepage) to find other pages on your website, linking to internal pages on your website from the homepage and secondary pages can be helpful to boost the search ranking of the destination pages. When doing so it is important to use descriptive "anchor text" in the hyperlink so search engines understand what the destination page is about.

For example, if a New York personal injury law firm handles different types of litigations, including construction accidents, a link to the "construction accident" practice area page from the site's homepage should not use meaningless "anchor text" such as "click here." Instead, a phrase such as "construction accidents" (or even better "New York construction accidents") should comprise the hyperlink.

#7: Link to High Quality, Topically-Related Pages on Third Party Websites

Many law firms have a "resources" section on their websites with links to third party websites of possible interest to their clients and other visitors. Such outbound links help define the community to which your site belongs. Linking to quality, topically-related pages can build trust in your domain. Conversely, linking to "spam" sites such as link farms is detrimental since your site becomes associated with them. So ignore requests to trade links with websites or blogs that have nothing to do with your firm's practice areas.

However, you also don't want your law firm's website to become an advertising vehicle for third party websites. Too many links to third party websites can drive traffic away from your website. So it's best to use outbound links sparingly. Think solely in terms of the value to your clients.

III. Post-Launch Best Practices

#8: Monitor Site Traffic With Analytics Software

Continually monitoring traffic to your website after launch with an analytics tool like Google Analytics can provide helpful insights. First, you'll identify "referral sources;" that is, other websites driving traffic to your site. This will help you determine the value of links from third party websites to your site traffic. You'll also be able to measure the impact on site traffic of such online marketing initiatives as email marketing campaigns.

> *Analytics software can identify the sources driving traffic to your*

Second, analytics software identifies the keywords plugged into search engines that are driving traffic to your site. This will help you determine what keywords interested parties are using to find your website, and tweak your site copy and title and description tags accordingly.

Ideally, it shouldn't just be your firm's name (or the names of its attorneys) that is driving traffic to your site. Instead, targeted keywords related to your geography and/or practice areas (e.g., "Oregon medical malpractice lawyer") should be driving a significant portion of traffic. A good analytics tool can help you measure progress towards this goal.

#9: Monitor Your Website With Google's Webmaster Tools

Because Google is such an influential search engine, periodically testing your website with Google's webmaster diagnostic tools is important. These tools can:

- Display URLs on the site that Google had trouble crawling and why it couldn't crawl them.

- View all the links from other websites back to your own, and what "anchor" text these sites are using to link back to your site.

- View the top search engine queries that are driving traffic to your site and where your site is included in the top search results for these queries.

- See how your site is indexed by Google and which of your pages are included in the index

#10: Aggressively Develop and Solicit Inbound Links

The number of inbound links from topically related sites is one of the most important criteria used by Google and other search engines to rank sites in search results. Indeed, in the poll by SEOMoz of SEO experts, keyword-focused anchor text from external links was ranked as the #1 SEO factor.

Accordingly, after its website launches, a law firm should aggressively seek to increase the number of inbound links from other topically related sites to the site's homepage and secondary pages. As noted, ideally, the "anchor texts" in these links should be descriptive of the destination page (instead of using a phrase like "click here").

There are a couple of strategies for increasing inbound links. First, identify any topically-related online legal directories in which it may be appropriate to list the site. Importantly, a firm should AVOID link "farms," which are simply aggregations of links from numerous unrelated industries. Google has stated that they ignore links from such directories, and instead focus on inbound links from sites with related content.

Second, a firm should identify and reach out to topically related "content" websites (including blogs) that may be willing to include links to articles and other content on its website. However, third party websites only want to link to content that will be interesting and valuable to their own readers and visitors. Therefore, before this strategy can be pursued, a firm needs to develop a program for regularly composing articles covering new developments and trends in key practice areas and publishing those articles to the website.

An especially effective strategy for attracting inbound links is to build targeted "microsites" around niche practice areas such as mining or securities. Niche content such as articles and other resources on microsites often attract interest from third parties.

In conclusion, follow these law firm website SEO best practices, and you'll likely see improving search engine rankings and traffic over time for the keywords that matter most to your firm.