

PR in the Age of Search Engine Optimization: Five Ways to Boost Your Firm's ROI through SEO



by Scott Johnson &
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Consider this: Up to 80 percent of Web traffic now begins in a search engine. Search engine optimization (SEO) is an important practice that businesses are now embracing as they seek to stay competitive in a world linked 24/7 to the Web.

Between December 2005 and April 2006, online searches jumped 25 percent from 5.1 billion to 6.4 billion per month. Annualized, that shift is a 95 percent increase. Potential clients are now buying services, not waiting to be sold. Through comprehensive identification of keyword search phrases and other research, SEO provides companies with a powerful way to influence the decisions and perceptions of consumers interested in their services.

The business reality of the Web's impact is changing the way law firms need to conduct effective public relations efforts. Here are five ways to get top-dollar results from your firm's PR efforts in the age of optimization.

1 Smart optimization helps you speak directly to your audiences.

Good PR equals much more than good press these days—it also means effective online marketing. As a result, the new metric for PR success is return on investment (ROI) as measured by leads, prospects and clients.

Powerful search engines, blogs and other consumer-generated media have completely changed the rules of how prospects receive a firm's messages. Today, mainstream reporters are often bypassed as the main conduits to consumers of information. Optimized press releases, white papers, blogs and Web landing pages can be found directly through Google, Yahoo! and other search engines.

If reporters won't take your pitch or run portions of your press release or white paper, myriad ways exist to distribute your messages online. Blogs have gained tremendous popularity as sources of credible information. A 2005

Columbia University study reported that more than half of all journalists were using blogs for information resources and story ideas, and that was two years ago.

2 Speak in the prospect's language, not yours.

Millions of prospects are searching the Web for information. What they are not looking for are your marketing messages. Nor do they want legalese or an "About Us" worldview. Speak in their language, not yours, and organize content on your Web site in ways that makes choosing you easier. "Ten important things to know about real-estate law" is useful. "Our practice areas" is not.

The top-down marketing communications of the past have been replaced by a two-way conversation that is ongoing, and the customer now controls this relationship. Informational Web content, or "landing page" content, is very similar to the kind of byline articles that in-house PR managers often request from attorneys. These articles can also be converted to optimized landing pages that can enrich your firm's Web site.

**Answer questions. Provide solutions.
Demonstrate experience. Deliver value.**

Answer questions. Provide solutions. Demonstrate experience. Deliver value. Prove that you're the best choice to solve potential clients' problems and when they do get to your site, give them a great user experience. Stop selling, and start making your firm findable and choosable.

3 It's not just who you know, but who knows you.

A key factor in favorable search engine rankings is the number of inbound links from other Web sites and the quality of those links. Some of the most sought-after links are those from .gov and .edu domains. Search engines know that these are credible institutions, so having them link to you increases your search engine

“mojo.” How do you get other respected Web sites to evangelize your Web site? Three key ways smart communications firms build inbound links are:

- Online article distribution (sending your article to another Web site for its use, and simply requiring a link to your site as the original source or author);
- Press release optimization (syndicating press releases online and tweaking for SEO); and
- Directory registration or directory submission is a great way to propagate your Web site and its content on the Internet. Registering your Web site with relevant, high-quality online directories helps generate traffic and build links to your site and landing pages.

Search engines want to know who has content that is relevant and trusted. It looks at relationships and associations for this. What other Web sites is your Web site related to or associated with? Each time you send out a press release or article, ask yourself: How can I place it on the Web with a link back to our site?

4 Be professional.

The best way to get people to link to your site—and to turn Web traffic into client sales—is to deliver value. Provide great content on your Web site, rather than simply touting your firm’s legal expertise. Follow guidelines for responsible SEO and don’t succumb to cheap tricks. For example, don’t use hidden redirects or links, and don’t fill your landing pages with irrelevant words or information for the sake of SEO.

Remember that the best Web landing pages, optimized press releases and online articles still require all the skills required by traditional PR professionals, including targeted messages and clear, concise writing.

5 Move beyond mainstream media.

Traditional communications practitioners often think of media relations strategies as the best means for meeting communications objectives. But mainstream media is a moving target—and the movement is downwards.

I Want Media (<http://www.iwantmedia.com/layoffs.html>), a Web site which has been tabulating U.S. media layoffs since June 2000, reported that more than 70,000 jobs at media companies have been lost in the past few years. Meanwhile, search advertising is expected to grow from \$4.2 billion in 2005 to \$7.5 billion in 2010, according to Jupiter Research.

Remember: Good PR means being both findable and choosable online. Clients for legal services, especially business executives, are big Internet users. A “Forbes” magazine survey found that senior executives typically spend twice as much time on the Web as they do watching TV. Chances are those executives are searching for information that will help them make informed decisions—the kind of information savvy professional services firms are serving up via the Web.

The bottom line? If you are measuring PR value by press clips, you’re using the wrong measuring stick. Site traffic, lead conversion and ROI are the metrics that really matter, and improving your Web site’s search engine optimization is a meaningful way to build those results. ⁿ

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