

# Make Your Website Visible to Search Engines: Find a Good SEO Expert

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What every law firm wants is to have its website appear on the first page of Google's search results. We leave aside the other search engines for now, because Google is still The King, though if you're interested, the January 2010 market share broke down as follows:

Google 65.4%  
Yahoo 17%  
Bing 11.5%

With those stats, most people are designing and doing SEO (search engine optimization) primarily with Google in mind. The problem with wanting to be on the first page of Google's search results is that everyone else wants the same thing.

The most popular area of law is family law. So here you are, a family lawyer in, let's say, Los Angeles, competing for Google's limited first page search results with all the other Los Angeles family lawyers. Clearly, only 10 law firms get to win the contest. The odds are not good.

We've talked about what's important to Google in a previous column but to recap quickly, Google **loves** quality (keep that word in mind) inbound links to your site. Other things that make a difference are your domain, the title of your page, how long your site has been around, how frequently it is updated, the depth and breadth of your content, the keywords (especially on the home page), etc.

Can you do SEO yourself? Sure, but will you? Our experience with lawyers suggests that most of them do not have the time or inclination to do their own SEO. Some lawyers begin with a bang and then fizzle out over time. In the end, most lawyers will have their websites designed to be SEO-friendly using the pointers in the last paragraph and then simply let it go. Others will hire an SEO company.

We decided to write this column largely because so many attendees at CLEs were asking us, "How do I find a good SEO company?"

Our first caution is that SEO is a forever project. If you're serious about improving your rankings, you must accept the fact that you will need to sign contracts for SEO. Most are for a year, with monthly payments and some are longer. Some web design companies do SEO – others do not. Some who claim to do SEO are stretching the truth to the breaking point. Here are some pointers for locating a good company:

1. Ask your friends to tell you who they use – if they are happy, you probably will be too. Referrals are the best way to find a good company.

2. Go ahead and Google “search engine optimization (insert your location).” How well does the company come up? If they don’t come up well, that suggests that they can’t even optimize their own site. Keep looking.
3. Do they sound like snake oil salesmen? Trust your nose. If something doesn’t smell right, walk away. Some companies look big on the website and turn out to be just one or two people. Some actually outsource the work abroad. Find out how long they’ve been in business. If they’ve only been around a year or two, be skeptical.
4. How are their clients doing? Reputable companies will have representative clients on their site so you can check and see how well logical Google searches present those clients. It’s also useful to call and see how their experience with the company was – were they responsive? How long did it take to get good results? Where were they in the rankings when they first hired the company? The costs?
5. Are they really SEO specialists? We wouldn’t shy away from a company that does both web design and SEO because they naturally go together. And we’ve seen a rise in companies that do both SEO and Google Adwords campaigns. But you might want to take a hard look at a general marketing or consulting firm which now offers SEO. It sometimes becomes the neglected stepchild of an organization which really has other core functions.
6. What kind of reporting do they offer? And is it real substantive reporting or “fluff and stuff?” You should receive ranking and analytics reporting on a regular basis, showing you your ranking for various search terms and reporting on new inbound links.
7. How do they plan to increase the number of inbound links to your site? If they cheat and use “link farms” (bogus sites that exist just to link to websites), your site is likely to get penalized by Google and you will actually drop down in the rankings. Google has terms of service – if you violate them, it can ‘ding’ your rankings or block you altogether. Also, we’ve seen some SEO companies spamming random blogs with crazy comments which contain a link to your site. You need to make sure you’re going to have someone who will obtain links legitimately.
8. Do they talk a lot about how “Content is King” and the need to constantly update your site? This is a good indicator, because Google’s mysterious algorithm for ranking sites (all experts have some sort of idea of how it works, but it is a closely guarded company secret) certainly loves sites that have depth and breadth of content and clearly dislikes sites that are largely static.
9. If they don’t mention press releases in their answer to #7, skip the company. Press releases are one of the best ways to get quality inbound links. Of course, you have

to have something worthy of coverage. As we write books and acquire companies, those kinds of press releases fare quite well, and we get picked up by major sites, usually at least 60-80 for each release. But if you start a new firm, unveil a new website, are the keynote speaker for a conference, those are all good possibilities. Let your imagination roam freely. We do some electronic marketing for law firms – the most successful press release we ever did involved a Virginia law firm that adopted ALL the dogs at an animal shelter for three months while they were awaiting adoption. In a bad economy, the shelter was totally thrilled – and because the release went out in December, a ton of media outlets picked it up as a ‘feel good’ holiday story, including a TV station that went out to film one of the lawyers. So think charity as well. Philanthropy should always be done from the heart, but it sure doesn’t hurt if it has the collateral effect of burnishing the law firm image.

10. If they promise results (“we can get you to the first page of Google in a month for these five search terms) – run. No one can make that promise stick. This is a good indicator of someone who intends to “cheat” the system.
11. What is the contract term? We think it is desirable to be able to terminate at will, or at least month to month, but most SEO companies try to get you to sign for at least a year.
12. What’s the monthly price? For solos and small firms, we’ve heard everything from \$200 to \$2500 (that was Findlaw and they called the \$2500 a discounted price). These monthly charges are usually for provision of additional content for your web site and the provision of inbound links. But make sure you understand precisely what the price includes. There are many things these firms can do to optimize your site for the search engines initially – as an example, Google Webmaster Tools tells you how to do a site map appropriately. Ask what tools the company uses.
13. Do a little research yourself on Google Webmaster Tools (it’s free). Bone up enough that you can ask some probing questions. The extent of the company’s knowledge (or ignorance) will then be readily apparent.
14. Some of what you hear may seem counter-intuitive. For quite a while, a home page with a nice design that fit on a single screen was considered elegant. This can still work for a large firm, because their sites are content rich, constantly changing and by nature of what they are, they have scads of other sites which link to them. A better SEO practice, certainly for smaller sites, is to have a longer home page, rich with keywords, though not to the point of being silly. Google doesn’t like keyword stuffing. SEO is complicated so if you’re shaking your head in mystification, you’ve got lots of company.
15. Do they offer exclusivity for your area? Clearly, if there are 1000 family law firms in a metropolitan area, you don’t want your site competing against all the

- other family law sites that the company may represent. There's a conflict of interest there. Some companies will offer absolutely exclusivity (very expensive) for an area of law. More often, companies will restrict themselves to representing no more than three to five law firms (somewhat less expensive) in your area of practice. These premiums tend to be quite high, so be prepared.
16. What happens if you terminate? Do you own all the work? Do all the links stay up? Are there ANY adverse consequences? In particular, we've seen companies that do both design and optimization and they own the site content. If you terminate them, the site content is theirs and your website goes "poof." Not a good idea.
  17. Don't confuse SEO with buying Google Adwords. That's marketing, not search engine optimization. Some SEO companies now do both and the monthly fees include a marketing component. We may gin up and do a Google Adwords article at some point, but that's beyond our scope for now. If you think SEO is complicated, take a stab at mastering Google Adwords in its thousands of permutations.
  18. Ask the vendor about the "long tail" strategy (if you get a blank look, you've just learned something). Studies have shown that obsessing over the top ten keywords on your site isn't worth the aggravation. Roughly 80% of a site's visitors who convert to clients get to the site using more obscure search terms (the long tail). For instance, if you're an education lawyer who has written an article about autistic children and how they are treated by school systems, you might be found by someone searching "autistic children schools." SEO companies use Google Webmaster Tools and other programs such as Wordtracker to identify how users are searching for the services you offer.
  19. Make sure you talk to at least three vendors. And do your due diligence. Search the Net for good reviews and bad.
  20. Look for an SEO company that is legal specific – they'll know the marketplace and have greater familiarity with search terminology. They often have legitimate networks of legal sites that can link to you – at least that's a start. They'll also be familiar with ethical considerations.

Once you've hired a company, don't obsess daily and check your statistics. Do use Google Analytics to see how folks are getting to your website – once a month is often enough to give you a clear picture, Of course, don't forget to ask your clients how they found you. Ask them if they've ever been to your website. Even if it isn't how they originally heard of you, if they visited the website, it has collateral value. Generally, Google is overwhelmingly the referring site that brings visitors to you.

No matter who you hire, remember that you have to be involved too. You may have to push for or implement web site changes. You may need to commit the time to do a legal

blog. You need to review the reports, ask questions and work as a good partner with your SEO company to determine “next steps.” Lawyers, as a breed, are not known for their patience, but SEO requires it. Slow and steady wins this race, so be a tortoise and not a hare.