

Is it Past Time to Reinvent Your Website?

Get Up to Speed

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Most solo and small firm lawyers are blissfully unaware that they are bleeding potential clients because they haven't been keeping up with the changes in website design — or with the transformation of websites demanded by mobile devices.

If you don't have a website that is responsive to mobile devices, you now have a pretty worthless website. So what does the word *responsive* mean? It means that your website knows what kind of device is accessing it and gracefully delivers an appropriately sized version of your site to the requesting device.

Have you ever checked out how your website looks and functions on a smart phone or tablet? Some legal websites look nothing short of dreadful — and many functions won't work properly. Though the statistics vary, it is now clear that 30-40 percent of the people accessing your website are doing so from a mobile device.

That percentage is only going to one way: up! The website that was "good enough" three years ago belongs in the marketing compost pile today.

Sites that are not responsive will experience very high bounce rates (because your competitors *are* spending money on responsive sites that appear beautifully on mobile devices) and less engagement by prospective clients. That is not a desirable fate for law firms, which generally see a hefty number of new clients each year from their website traffic.

Even *Forbes* magazine has jumped on this bandwagon, gently berating website owners for not paying attention to the rapidly moving landscape of website design. *Forbes* puts the percentage of mobile devices accessing your website at 40 percent — and grimly cites Google statistics showing that the percentage doubled within a year. You don't need a crystal ball to tell you what the future holds and how significant it will be for law firm marketing to take remedial measures.

Where to Start

Presuming that you are now persuaded that you need a website that is responsive, you may ask, "How much will it cost?" Sorry to say, you'll have to settle for the customary and unsatisfactory "it depends" answer. If your website is very simple, you may be looking at several thousand dollars. But if it is more complex, or you haven't redesigned it in a very long time, you'll be looking at a substantial outlay of monies. Inquiries to friends in the industry suggest that \$7,000-\$15,000 is a common range of estimates, and estimates are higher for sites with complicated functionalities. You may actually need separate pages to be displayed for mobile

devices, with some scaled back content in order to fit on the smaller screens.

After you ensure that your site is responsive, you're going to want to look at some changes made by Google last year. Google is still the big kahuna of the search engines with a market share of 67 percent in 2013. We have always believed that if you design for Google, you'll do fine on other search engines as well.

Google Carousel

One new feature you must contend with is the ongoing rollout of Google's Carousel. To see what that is, Google "Chicago pizza restaurant" and you'll find a black bar at the top of the screen showing pizza restaurants in Chicago; it is a carousel because you can move the bar left and right. The Carousel listings appear to be based on the number and quality of Google reviews. Thus far, Carousel is only being applied to certain kinds of services. For now, law firms do not seem to be included in Carousel — but it is only a matter of time. Hence, we recommend that you optimize your Local Places listing in Google so that you will be taking advantage of Carousel when the time comes. Sadly, many lawyers have not even explored how best to utilize Local Places.

If you are that far behind, Google "Getting started with a local business listing on Google Places," and Google itself will take you through a primer.

For a more complete understanding of how Carousel works, just Google the words "How Carousel Works" and you'll learn about how users can filter results, how some results are not geography-dependent, etc. We hear you sighing, but 2014 should be the year you really come up to speed on developments in the search optimization (SEO) world.

Google Hummingbird

Let's move from Carousel to Google's Hummingbird algorithm, which is also unknown to most lawyers. Unlike the previous Penguin and Panda updates to its existing algorithm, Google's Hummingbird is a complete replacement, the first time since 2001 that there has been a revolutionary new algorithm.

Chiefly, Hummingbird takes into account that users search using questions and an expanded number of words in any query that, if understood properly, indicate the intent of the user. Keywords have far less meaning now since Hummingbird returns results based on what it thinks you are looking for. And, in fact, it does a pretty good job.

But it makes SEO far more complex. SEO expert David Amerland has even said, "Quick SEO is now firmly in the past."

In part, this means the old dark art of "keyword stuffing" is fading away. Content remains king (minus the keyword stuffing) but it is now more valuable if it is shared, linked to and noted by influencers in particular subject areas. Search term data is no longer provided by Google, a move which had many SEO companies pulling their hair out. As they have had to explain to their clients, Hummingbird weeds out irrelevant sites from Google's search results. This means that the focus of your website has to be answering the queries of those using Google to search rather than finding awkward ways to use the term "personal injury attorney" dozens of times on a single page.

Hummingbird has been described as having "semantic" or "conversational" searching, making the results respond in a more human manner since it understands what you are looking for. Users search differently now on mobile devices — sometimes the query is shorter because they are typing and sometimes longer because they are searching by talking to Siri, Sherpa, SVoice or other voice-powered smartphone assistants. Most of the time, they ask questions.

In the old SEO days, you'd ask, "How do I rank for this query?" In the new SEO era, you should ask, "How do I best answer the questions site visitors have?"

Hummingbird and Social Media

There is a strong social media component to Hummingbird, which likes shared content. Our guess (no one knows the individual components of Google's closely guarded algorithm) is that there may be a weighted component for Google+, which might make it advisable to add Google+ to your social media efforts, if you haven't already.

Our own experience indicates the importance of blogs in particular. Author Nelson's *Ride the Lightning* blog generally accounts for about half of the most visited pages each month on the Sensei Enterprises site. Referring pages are often from thought influencers in information security and digital forensics, which means Hummingbird will rank the posts higher. As we all know, Google loves updated info, and continuing fresh blog posts are duly given more weight by Hummingbird. So if you've been thinking about blogging, this may be the time to put that thought into action. And write it yourself — Google is on to those who farm out the writing — it recognizes duplicative posts across the country. Also be mindful of the ethical rules against deception! In other words, make sure you realize the potential consequences of ghost blogging without a clear disclaimer.

The rules of engagement have indeed changed a bit for SEO so, if you have a website, you have homework to do. Your first priority is to make your website responsive. Your second is to reevaluate your website in light of the Hummingbird that took flight in 2013 — and where it goes, all law firms seeking potential clients online would be wise to follow in its flight path.

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