



IS YOUR LAW FIRM LOOKING TO HIRE AN **SEO CONSULTANT?**

Ask these **7** questions to ensure you're making the best decision for your checkbook and your practice's online reputation.

Last year, a reputable SEO industry leader conducted an experiment to challenge the many critics who claim that most SEO consultants are scam artists, providing minimal assistance at exorbitant prices. The experimenter posed as an inexperienced webmaster whose site had been suffering from a drop in ranking following a major Google update. He reached out to over 30 third party SEO companies for advice on strategies to improve his site. Of all the responses, only 7 gave him correct advice on what he could do to help his site; the others delivered tips that would not help his site in any significant way. The findings confirmed what many suspected to be true – it is incredibly difficult to find qualified SEO assistance to optimize your site.

In the wake of the cyber explosion, the overwhelming majority of business owners recognize the necessity of a strong online presence, but most don't have the technical knowledge to build one. They rely on outside consultants who unfortunately take advantage of their lack of SEO knowledge to sell them inadequate solutions. This trend has been all too prevalent in the legal industry, especially among solo practitioners and small firms who simply don't have the support staff to oversee such campaigns. In an effort to help attorneys differentiate between the SEO scam artists and those consultants who can actually help them obtain results, we've compiled a list of seven questions you should bring to the table during the selection process.

1

Do you have experience working with legal professionals?

You wouldn't go to a podiatrist for an EKG or to a general dentist for braces, but when it comes to marketing, people tend to undervalue specialization. Sure, any marketing agency can put together an attractive newspaper advertisement or pretty website, but that doesn't mean they can develop and implement an effective ongoing marketing campaign. And the truth is you may not even want them to try, considering the strict ethics requirements imposed on attorney advertisements in all 50 states.

Some components of search engine optimization are technical but given recent changes in Google's algorithms, quality content has gained tremendous importance, creating a necessity for specialized SEO consultants who truly understand the industry for which they're optimizing. When it comes to the legal industry, specialization is required for three main reasons: 1) an understanding of keywords, 2) content and effective engagement of prospects, and 3) insight into ethics.

KEYWORDS

As you know all too well, little is simple when it comes to the practice of law. Understanding prospective consumers of legal services is also complex, requiring keen insight into the legal process and the ways in which prospective clients are searching for an attorney. If you tell most SEO consultants that you are an estate planning firm, they will likely optimize your firm's website broadly for "estate planning" in your geographic location. With limited knowledge of the field, they're not likely to know that most people searching for an estate planning attorney won't search by "estate planning" but instead use layperson terms like "I need a will drafted" or "attorney to create a trust for my grandchildren."

CONTENT

Without any knowledge of estate planning or the general practice of law, it's unlikely that an SEO consultant can do much to optimize your current content in a way that resonates with potential clients. And most importantly, would you be comfortable letting a non legal professional, who has never worked with an attorney, prepare information that will represent your firm on the World Wide Web? If you're like most attorneys, the answer is most definitely NOT.

ETHICS

As an attorney, you've read and understand the Rules of Professional Conduct and understand the ethical requirements which must be considered in any advertising (including your firm's website). The issue with working with an SEO consultant who has no experience in the legal industry is that they have no knowledge of these requirements. Most will ask for the login credentials to your Content Management System and go to work optimizing your meta titles, descriptions and keywords. And this seems rather harmless because these parts of your website aren't visible on site pages but they too are subject to ethics rules. Far too often SEO consultants become accustomed to using phrases like "Attorney Smith is the best divorce attorney in Newark, NJ" in the meta descriptions (these appear in the search engine results pages) in hopes of increasing the click through rates. Of course, the use of superlatives, like "best", which can't be substantiated are prohibited. Unless you routinely check on your SEO consultant's work (which can prove rather challenging if you don't even know what a meta description is), you may run afoul of ethics requirements without ever realizing it.

2

What will you do to optimize my site?

SEO consultants love this question because most attorneys have no idea what the correct answer should be. If you have ever asked it, you've likely encountered a long list of tech gibberish; things like meta tag optimization, dynamic sitemap creation and submission, optimization of alt tags and off-site link building. And while some of these strategies may help a bit, the list for most SEO consultants is missing one HUGE, and the most important, component in SEO success - content creation and optimization. This comes back to our earlier point; most SEO consultants don't employ this optimization strategy because they aren't writers, and they have no legal experience. If you are considering hiring an SEO consultant, ask them for specific strategies that they will use to optimize your site. If a dynamic content strategy isn't a part of that list, take your business elsewhere - you're about to be ripped off.

Before you begin the selection process, take time to understand the difference between SEO and SEM. Search engine optimization is the process of increasing a site's visibility by increasing its ranking in the organic search results. Search engine marketing (SEM), on the other hand, focuses on Pay-per-Click campaigns which will get your site in the "sponsored results" of the search engine result pages (SERPs). Of course the problem with SEM is that it will get you immediate results but you will continuously have to pay for this top placement, and your site's placement in the organic results isn't likely to increase. For optimal results, a combination of both SEM and SEO is recommended for new sites, ensuring you get business early on while also building a strategy for long-term success in the organic results. Very often SEO consultants will make a Pay-per-Click campaign the focal point of their work, meaning the minute you stop using their services, your business from the web is likely to take a hit.

Ask your prospective SEO consultants about both SEO and SEM, and make sure that both will be included in your campaign.

3 Can I see writing samples?

As the world of SEO continues to evolve and the focus shifts to dynamic content, which delivers value to the site visitor, it's imperative that you select an SEO consultant who can actually create high-quality content. Ask to see some of his or her work during your first conversation. An SEO consultant who recognizes its value will undoubtedly have a great portfolio of sites, and content projects, which they've carried out for clients. If they don't, don't risk it. Unfortunately, few SEO Consultants are strong copywriters meaning your site's integrity, and your professional image, might be jeopardized.

4 How long will it take?

The answer to this question is of course two-fold, and is largely dependent on whether the SEO consultant will be employing both SEM and SEO for your site. If you are asking how long it will take to get a great number of visitors to your site, the response may be immediately by using a Pay-per-Click Campaign. However, if you're asking how long it will take for your site's ranking to improve in the search engine results, the answer should be a few months; this is because it can take some time for Google and other search engines to crawl your new site and update their indexes. Even after a website is added to a search engine's index, it can still take as much as six to nine months for your site to receive a high ranking because there is a general tendency by many search engines to not list new sites high up on the search results list. This is known in the search engine world as being in the "sand box" which is a metaphorical term coined by search engine experts to explain why most new websites have poor rankings.

Any consultant who swears that they can obtain great rankings for your site in a short time frame is lying, or worse, employing black hat strategies which may initially boost your ranking but may ultimately get your site penalized, once the search engines catch on to the foul tactics.

5

How will you measure success?

This is an important question for you to ask both yourself and your SEO Consultant. Is your goal to just increase your site's ranking or is it to get more phone calls or, more specifically, an increase in the number of people who sign up for your monthly seminar? It's absolutely critical that both you and your SEO consultant understand, and agree on a strategy to reach those goals.

Very often SEO consultants just focus on your site's ranking and number of visitors. If they increase both, they've done their job. But what if the number of calls doesn't increase with that jump? Will the SEO consultant be able to help you understand where the visitors were lost? If not, you might be better suited working with a full-service marketing firm.

At the least, an SEO Consultant should generate a monthly report which highlights the statistics that correspond to your particular goals, and have regular calls with your office to provide you with updates on the strategies being employed and any changes that may impact your ranking. After all, you need to know what you're getting for your investment!

6

How much will it cost?

As you probably already know, the cost of SEO can vary drastically and will largely depend on whether SEM is being used (this will require a monthly keyword budget) and just how much work is being done (if you are in a very competitive market, more will be needed). As a note of warning, be wary of prices that are too cheap. As with anything else, you get what you pay for. A lot of companies advertise SEO packages starting as low as \$99 a month. At that price point, you can be sure that they will not be doing content optimization and the strategy will largely consist of tweaking your page titles, meta tags and perhaps submitting a sitemap. The effects of this type of optimization will be minimal, if any, and not worth the hundred dollar monthly investment. Generally speaking, an SEO campaign with a strong content component can cost anywhere from \$500, in a smaller market, to \$5000, in a competitive one.

Since you likely don't want to be tethered to your SEO Consultant for life, this is an important question to ask early on, and it will allow you to better gauge just how honest they are. If an SEO consultant is implementing sound strategies and you find that your site's ranking does increase, you should not see any sudden drops should you discontinue the service. However, it would be fair to warn your firm that Google's algorithms are always changing (while the exact number isn't released to the public, it's estimated that the leading search engine makes anywhere from 500 to 1000 updates in a single calendar year) and consequently your site's ranking may change. Also, if your SEO Consultant was providing you with regular content updates, and then you fail to update your site for a few months, your site will also likely take a hit.

CONCLUSION

Most attorneys aren't web development or SEO experts; thankfully, you don't have to be one to select an honest, qualified SEO consultant. As you consider your options, don't be afraid to ask questions and if you don't understand the proposed strategies, ask for further explanation and examples of how this has worked for other law firms. And while you probably won't have the time to learn all of the ins and outs of SEO, remember the business goal of the search engines; they can only be successful if they deliver high quality sites which are relevant to their users' search queries, meaning they can't afford to have poorly designed websites with subpar content in those top spots. They have become very sophisticated in the past few years, and can now detect the difference between good, bad and mediocre, regardless of how well optimized the meta tags or sitemap is optimized. If a prospective SEO provider is making claims and proposing strategies which even the worst website could implement without delivering more value to the visitor, explore other options.

And while you may not be a tech wizard, you are an expert at reading people. If you find the prospective SEO "expert" becomes uncomfortable, or defensive while answering your questions, they're probably blowing smoke and realizing that they're losing at their own game.

Be sure to take detailed notes throughout the selection process, and once you have made your decision, refer back to these notes and ask the provider about their progress in implementing the proposed strategies. A reputable SEO consultant will likely insist on bi-weekly or monthly calls to report on the campaign. Take time to ask questions during these calls, and learn the basics of SEO so you can expand your knowledge base during the process.