How to integrate online marketing and your client intake process

A look at Google AdWords's place in your marketing plan, and the importance of integrating digital marketing with case intake

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In today's ultra-competitive legal landscape, law firms risk losing important opportunities to land new cases if they take too long to respond to potential client inquiries. The continued rapid evolution of technology today has made it possible to access our email, voicemail, text messages, and social media communications from anywhere, at any time, every second of the day. This "instant need to know and be heard" evolution has ratcheted up consumer expectations and placed pressure on law firms to immediately, in real time, connect and communicate with potential clients.

Firms that do not react rapidly to potential client inquiries will, and do, lose those potential clients to their closest rivals who cater to our instantaneous information culture. With this stark reality in mind, is a firm's slow response time to prospective client inquiries a product of their intake process? If so, then what constitutes an effective and appropriate response time?

How long is too long to respond to inquiries?

A critically important first step in gaining an understanding of how your firm must respond to potential client inquiries is to perform basic market research of your competition's response times and tactics. Assign someone on your team to do a "secret-shopping" expedition. How? Create a list of the firms you see as your biggest competitors both locally and nationally, if necessary, for your practice. Develop a fictional situation and script for your secret caller to follow while contacting your competitive sample group.

Find out if your competitors have a person dedicated to answering phone calls, or if voice mail is used in place. If a live person is answering calls, are they able to provide legal assistance, or are they simply capturing contact information?

Tip: One of the biggest mistakes firms make is to route incoming client inquiries to a receptionist who is ill-prepared or too busy to field these critical calls. The most important statistic, and the one that will provide you with the intelligence to craft your firm's strategy, is to measure how long it takes each of your competitors to connect your secret caller with someone who can provide worthwhile, useful information. A similar review can be done with web form submissions and live chat services. Live chat services provide potential clients visiting your website with the opportunity to instantly and anonymously communicate with a professional agent who is trained to connect these people with an attorney at your firm.

Keep in mind that a person seeking legal assistance is likely to be eager to talk to someone they think can help. Unless someone has contacted your firm as a result of a referral, it is likely that he or she will continue their search for representation beyond the initial inquiry until convinced that your firm is a good potential fit. Simply put, your firm is at risk of losing new cases to other firms if you cannot match, or better, exceed the response times of your competitors.

Powerful options to improve your intake process

If dedicating staff to respond to leads is not an option, consider using a professional call center or live chat team to field inquiries and qualify leads. These services typically send email notifications with contact information along with the call or chat dialog immediately upon completion of the call or chat. The best opportunity to land new cases is to assign a designated phone number at your firm during office hours, where qualified leads can be forwarded to speak with an associate or partner.

Call center services are typically priced by the minute, with chat services often charged on a per lead basis. This makes for an extremely affordable and compelling solution since you only pay for what you use.

Tip: If you decide you'd like to try working with a call center or chat provider, be sure to ask for examples of their clients and then perform the same type of secret caller process as described above to vet the vendor. The vendor you choose will be on the front lines for your firm and will have an influence on how your firm will be perceived.

Filling your intake process pipeline

The "Attorney Selection Research Study," conducted by The Research Intelligence Group (TRIG) in 2012, surveyed consumers who looked for an attorney in the past year. Results found that 76 percent of legal clients used an online resource at some point in their process of finding a lawyer.

The study concluded that referrals from friends and family (73 percent) remain a key method consumers turn to when seeking an attorney. However, the study found that consumers are slightly more likely to conduct an Internet search as they are to turn to people they know, which marks a significant shift in trend. This means that law firms aspiring to grow their business and capture a consistent flow of new cases must have a strong internet presence and visibility. While an effective search engine optimization (SEO) campaign is essential for getting your firm's website ranked on the first page of Google organic search results, moving up in the rankings takes time and requires persistence. It could take between six and eighteen months, depending on how competitive your keywords are, to see movement in your rankings. If you are looking for a quicker solution for generating traffic, you'll need to consider other options.

Paid search: Google AdWords

Among the most effective ways to introduce your firm to a potential new client is through paid search advertising on Google's pay-per-click program called AdWords. These ads appear at the top of the search results page, above the organic listings. Despite the small box next to their title reading "ad," many consumers are unaware that these are paid advertisements. Rather than having to wait patiently while you are working to build up your SEO, you can pay for the chance to get seen on page one of Google search results immediately by developing AdWords campaigns.

Essentials of campaign development

The most important component to developing effective AdWords campaigns is having an experienced person managing your campaigns. Effective marketing requires an understanding of what motivates people to take action and what makes people lose interest. Someone who is inexperienced in writing ad copy that inspires action, or developing landing pages that convert visitors to contacts, is unlikely to be effective.

Tip: One of the biggest mistakes we see consistently being made is a practice of driving AdWords campaign traffic to a firm's home page. This is a mistake because search campaigns are delivering leads who are looking for a specific thing, "auto accident attorney" or "dog bite lawyer," for example. By driving these leads to your home page, you leave it up to the visitor to find their way to the page that describes your experience in handling the type of case they are interested in and you run a great risk of losing them within seconds; making that click you just paid for useless.

Strategies that are more likely to convert a web visitor to a lead who contacts you, utilize landing pages that support the search keyword and ad copy. This enables you to deliver a consistent message and satisfying user experience. The user types their need into Google, they see an ad that captures their interest, and they are brought to a page that delivers the information they are looking for. Now that you've given them what they need, you can ask them to take the action you want and contact you. If you do not provide visitors with the information they need, you will not be in the position to ask for the order.

Can we compete against bigger budgets?

You don't need a large budget to compete and get results from an AdWords campaign. You designate to Google how much your firm is willing to spend per day for whatever time period you want to run your ads. When your click volume for the day meets your daily budget, your ads stop displaying until the next day.

An experienced AdWords campaign manager can help your firm to get the most out of your budget. Careful study of the AdWords analytics will uncover the most productive keywords. By limiting bids to only the keywords that produce quality traffic, you can avoid paying for useless clicks.

Tip: What drives ROI for AdWords is the campaign manager's knowledge of strategy and commitment to overseeing all the details that influence results. Don't let budget restraints keep you from exploring this channel that has the potential to grow your business.

Evaluating AdWords campaign performance

Launching an AdWords campaign without giving it ongoing oversight is financially irresponsible. The decision to invest in Google AdWords campaigns begs for a commitment to analyze campaign performance because there is almost always the opportunity to improve results. One of the most essential mantras for any marketing endeavor is "always be testing." In other words, never be satisfied with the current outcome; always be striving for better results. After all, you've got money on the line.

There are several key components which each contribute to campaign performance: keyword and bidding strategies, ad copy, and landing pages. Each of these must be continually monitored in an effort to maximize your ROI.

Keyword and bid performance

When you launch your AdWords campaign, you designate a bid amount for each of the keywords for which you'd like to deliver an ad. Your bid amount is a very significant (but not only) factor in determining which position your ad will display. The other key factor that influences ad position is how relevant the ad copy and landing page are to the

keyword. Google assigns what they call a quality score for relevancy. The more relevant the ad copy and landing page are to the keyword, the higher the score.

Tip: What can positively impact your budget is the fact that Google rewards high quality scores with lower costs per click.

The average ad position is a key metric to monitor. Top page placement is critical for AdWords success because click through rates and traffic to your website are highly dependent on ad position. Click rates decline with each drop in ad position. AdWords analytics show the average position in which each keyword ranked. We strive for positions 1 to 3. If ad positions for any keyword are below 3, increasing the bid amount should help raise the ad position, assuming that your keywords have good quality scores.

How compelling are your ads?

It is difficult to evaluate the true performance of ad copy until an average ad position between 1 and 3 is obtained. Ad performance is best measured by click rates because the goal of the ad is to inspire a click to the landing page. If the analytics are reporting an average position lower than 3, it becomes unclear on whether the click rate is the result of a low ad position or a product of the ad copy.

Generally speaking, when we evaluate ad performance, we tend to strive for a minimum click rate of 2 percent. We tend to start a campaign with at least two different ad versions for each keyword group. We monitor the performance of all the ads, identify text that is working best, incorporate that copy into other ads, and eliminate under-performing ad copy.

How are consumers interacting with your landing pages?

When a consumer lands on your website, your AdWords campaign has fulfilled its purpose. Now it's the job of the landing page to convert that visitor into a lead or contact. This is the vital point where the consumer must be provided with the exact information she or he is looking for. This is also the time where the consumer will make a judgment call on whether your firm is qualified or feels like a good fit.

The most obvious metric for determining how the landing page is performing is by the number of contacts it generates, or conversion rate. Another key metric to monitor is the bounce rate from Google Analytics. A bounce is defined as a visitor who lands on a page and leaves without visiting another page. A high bounce rate for a page suggests that visitors did not find the page engaging enough to continue to explore other pages on your site.

In general, if you want your website to be a strong case development asset, it is important to have a person experienced in Google Analytics review your site analytics on a periodic basis. Google Analytics provides intelligence on how visitors are engaging with your site overall.

Tip: Without reviewing how all pages are performing and understanding where you are losing visitors, you can't fix problems that may be getting in the way of capturing new potential clients.

Building accountability for your intake process

Law firm consumer leads today are, for the most part, delivered digitally over the internet. A contact submits a form on your website and an email is sent to a designated person or people at your firm with contact information and other fields of data that are requested on the form.

If you contract with a third-party call center or live chat provider, their emailed lead notifications can be used to feed your Client Relationship Management (CRM) or other system your firm uses as a central place to store client information. The notifications can include data specifying where the lead came from. From the call center a customized telephone number can designate which marketing program or advertisement generated the lead. The chat notification can identify what web page the consumer was visiting when he or she initiated the chat. These fields of data can provide rich marketing intelligence further down the road, helping your firm to make decisions on where to best spend your firm's marketing dollars.

By feeding your system with lead data as soon as the consumer reaches out to your firm, you reduce the need for manual input for data that has already been captured. Rather than have a staff member summarize the gist of the exchange, you can store the message or dialog in its entirety.

Integrate leads with client intake

Integrating incoming leads with your intake process can help prevent good leads from falling through the cracks. Requiring intake staff to keep the lead status updated and monitored will lend a level of quality control to the process. A consistent coding system for defining the status of the lead can enable your firm to understand how much potential each lead produced. For example, "rejected – no action," "rejected – reviewed medical records," "referred to another attorney," etc.

A CRM will enable your firm to build a foundation for accountability for your intake process, and over time, recognize trends that may identify opportunities that can be leveraged, or point to problems that need addressing.

Capturing prospective client attention, providing a simple "real time" channel for prospective clients to connect with your firm, and responding rapidly to those connections are all part of an effective intake process. Whether your firm decides to take on a long SEO campaign aimed at capturing new cases or you implement an advertising plan to shorten the lead generation process, testing and evaluation of data should be the factors that continually drive your marketing strategies and intake processes.

Hanshaw

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Plaintiff


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