

Digital Marketing for Law Firms: A Double-Edged Sword?

Featured in the October 2019 edition of the [Edge International Communiqué](#)

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In today's competitive landscape, legal-services providers can no longer rely only on word-of-mouth and referrals to generate new clients. With technology changing almost every aspect of our professional lives, marketing has also undergone a complete overhaul. Websites, blogs, search engines, e-mail, social media, e-books, mobile phone apps have seamlessly made their way into our lives in a such manner that today, any branding initiative is incomplete without digital marketing being a part of it. However, digital marketing doesn't come without its own share of potential risks. This article outlines possible cautionary best practices that lawyers should follow, to add gravitas to their marketing strategies and to avoid falling prey to risks associated with digital marketing and social media.

Access to Clients Comes with Responsibility

Perhaps the biggest advantage of having a digital presence is the access it provides to potential clients who may be looking for legal services. Online directory listings have allowed law firms to be discovered by those who are looking for assistance in particular service areas. Those firms with an online presence through social media profiles and websites that take advantage of search engine optimisation (SEO) tools_____

However, with greater access comes greater responsibility. Today, potential clients also approach firms with an expectation that they will respond almost on a real-time basis. An online presence, especially on social media, naturally gives birth to expectations of a quick turnaround time – and not just in the time frame of a nine-to-five work day. If you're not able to furnish the same in the expected time frame, you tend to lose business to competitors. This is not only because your competitors also have an online presence, but also because the potential client did not get relevant information from you when sought, and hence looked for alternatives.

Real-Time Feedback

A great advantage of digital marketing is the bi-directional approach it offers, in comparison to traditional marketing. Traditional promotional initiatives (like print directory listings) were based on a business-to-customer approach, where firms could provide information to potential clients without enabling a platform where those potential clients could also respond. But digital marketing has not only allowed a channel for potential clients to interact with firms, but also the opportunity for them to gain more trust in a firm's brand, as they can learn more about it and its lawyers. However, this comes with a red flag, too. A client who has had a bad experience in dealing with a firm may not shy away from sharing the experience publicly. While some of these risks could be mitigated by keeping checks on who can tag your online profiles in their posts or who can post on your profile pages, a

significant loss of reputation can occur during the time elapsed in taking corrective action to remove negative feedback of this kind.

Wider Reach; Specific Approach

Another feature of digital marketing that makes it stand apart from traditional strategies is that it allows firms to reach a wider audience than ever before, at almost at the click of a button. However, the quality and quantity conundrum needs to be resolved wisely here. Your clients, both existing and potential, must connect with your branding or knowledge initiative. If you create a newsletter that is focussed on the real estate sector and legal issues surrounding real estate, construction, infrastructure, etc., and your clients are not all related to that sector, it would make no sense for you to send it out to everyone in your mailing list. A pharmaceutical client or FMCG company would be disappointed to go through a newsletter that contained absolutely nothing of their interest: they might not even open your future newsletters. Therefore, firms must have a personalised and individualistic approach when utilising digital marketing. Firms must take stock of demographics and have a strategy to approach each kind of target client. Rather than reaching a broad audience, the goal should be to reach a specific or niche audience. Whether you're approaching a single person or a million, your targeted content must be relevant, engaging, timed well, and should offer value to the end-user.

Cost, Training and Expertise

The entire idea behind the creation of a brand is the opportunity it offers for a firm to stand out from peers and competitors, positioning itself as a 'thought leader' or 'expert' in certain areas. The reputation of being a 'premier' service provider who is well-equipped to achieve best results for clients will naturally make potential service-seekers gravitate towards you. However, to have a well-crafted digital presence, firms need to invest in developmental expertise; marketing for law firms requires a skill-set that comprises a unique combination of technical expertise and creativity. First, those in charge of developing a firm's brand strategy must be well-versed with any relevant legal restrictions in their jurisdiction. Second, law firms should focus on 'content marketing', i.e., blog posts, e-books, articles, research papers, newsletters, vlogs, case studies, podcasts, webinars, etc. 'Content' will help to address questions or queries of potential clients and make them buy into your expertise even without retaining you professionally. The only drawback with this, however, is the cost and effort. Once you start being active on social media, you can't subsequently choose to be intermittent with your posts. The social media presence has to be 'active' and your content has to be recent and relevant. These initiatives may take up otherwise billable time of lawyers. Hence, it is advisable to hand this kind of work over to experts recruited specially for the purpose, or to outsource it to those who are adept at handling such marketing campaigns. In both cases, the costs must be factored in and compared with return on investment.

Digital Marketing Can Leave a Trail

While digital marketing, including social media initiatives, come with pros that far outdo the cons, mistakes or lack of etiquette can be forgiven but not forgotten. Your profiles, as well as the content you post, is an extension of your image and must hence be handled with caution. Most digital platforms are public and firms should not post anything that current or potential clients may find offensive – endorsing a particular political view or party, for example. Similarly, grammatical errors will always be noticed (whether someone points them out or not). So before the firm website goes live, or before one presses the 'share' button on a social media post that represents the firm, it would be worthwhile to spend five minutes in proof-reading the content. Digital content leaves a footprint, so firms must ensure that theirs is not outdated or factually or legally wrong. It obviously goes without saying that the firms need to educate their lawyers and other staff members not to jeopardise their clients' interests by posting any confidential client or firm-related information on social media.

Summing Up

While 'word of mouth' networking and referrals have been the traditional ways of branding for lawyers, having an online presence is almost non-negotiable in today's world. However, both approaches must work together. With certain wise practices and cautious use, digital marketing can pave the way for traditional marketing, as after a referral, potential clients are likely to look for online brand perception and ranking before engaging a lawyer or law firm. Therefore, having a balanced marketing strategy that combines the elements of traditional as well as digital marketing will go a long way in building a sturdy reputation and reinforcing a brand that is seen in a positive light.
