

A Practitioner's Guide to Website Design and Search Engine Optimization

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ABSTRACT: In this article, Seth Rowland looks at an approach to website design and search engine optimization, that separates the "technology" and "design" from the "information" and enables (or rather requires) you the lawyer to take an active and continuing role in your firm's website. Through use of a properly configured web-based Content Management System (or "CMS"), your firm can achieve the goals of (1) effective communication with your existing clients, (2) establishing your firm's expertise in particular areas of the law, (3) winning at "Google" by establishing your firm as a trusted resource for key search terms.

Of Art, Design and the Black Arts

It has been said that website design is an "art" left to the artists; that the goal of the website is to create that "perfect space" which will impress all "comers", a task left up to the "web designers" and "web consultants". It has also been said search engine optimization ("SEO") is a black art, where those who "pay to play" get preferred treatment in the Great Search Game.

Nothing could be further than the truth. Website design is no different than other "marketing" initiatives undertaken by a law firm; the goal is to get the word out of what you do, and how well you do it. Design really is secondary to "information". As for the black art of SEO, the real key is "words". Search engines target words; the more words you have; the more likely those words will percolate to the top of the search engines.

This article will take the mystery and mythology out of website design and search engine optimization ("SEO") and introduce the concept of Content Management Systems (or "CMS"). The first part of this article deals with the benefits of a CMS - a platform or product that separates styling and code from the textual content, largely to enable non-coders to build content rich websites that are accessible, consistent and dynamic. The second part of this article deals with SEO - the art of having search engines rank you well, so that people searching for your services can find your website easily.

Why should you care? In the movie, "Field of Dreams," Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) plowed down his cornfield to build a baseball field, responding to a voice in his head: "If you build it, he will come." Some thought Ray was crazy; why should anyone come out to a cornfield in Iowa to watch a ballgame. Similarly, why should anyone come to your website that you have built at great expense? The answer is that you must give them a "compelling" reason to come; a reason to stay; and most important, a reason to come back. If you do, eventually, some of those visitors will become clients; some friends and

relations of those visitors may be referred to you because of your established expertise; and you will make money.

CMS: Code and Content -v- Dynamic Separate Content

The days of a website being a static, code-heavy, firm resume are long past. In the 1990's, most websites were "static"; the actual text of a page was buried in HTML coded pages and updated manually by a web expert who could "code" in hypertext markup language ("HTML"). To edit text, you had to understand html code and be careful to edit the content without messing up the formatting, layout and design instructions buried in the code. Some of this code was, and is, truly complex. When you added in navigation, graphics, cross-links, videos, and forms, a simple website quickly morphed into a major technological and financial undertaking. As a result, many websites became orphans; once built, never modified.

Web 2.0 changed everything. Websites became "dynamic". Most important, Web 2.0 separated content from design. Choose a "design template". Follow a "wizard" to put in your firm name, and firm description. Suddenly, anyone could produce a website, and many did, with horrific results. These days, a pedestrian website is "Not OK". If you don't engage your "visitors," they leave and go elsewhere, seldom if ever to return. The Google search box is omnipresent in all browsers. How hard is it to type "New York patent attorney" and click search?

Enter CMS

Content Management Systems (CMS) change the web design and update game completely. To start with, most of them are free. Many come with free "design" templates or pre-packaged designs you can purchase for a nominal fee and modify. CMS systems offer easy content updates and edits without a web designer, consistent look and feel, automatic navigation and site maps, backup procedures and automated content management, to name a few.

CMS lets you focus on CONTENT. Content is king, both to engage the visitor, and, as we will discuss further on down, the key to search engine optimization. If you don't have good content, really good content, you don't have a website. With CMS there is no excuse for outdated information. With a CMS you can broadcast new developments at your firm, attorneys in the news, new legal developments and a wealth of information which will engage your visitors and lead to new business and referrals.

Aggregated Content ("RSS")

The "website" is only the beginning. Most CMS platforms you to supply "news feeds" to subscribers. Articles, news, and weblogs you add to your site can simultaneously show up elsewhere, adding reach to your firm's marketing initiatives. This has many benefits. It provides an easy way for people to link to your site (which is always an SEO priority). It allows you to distill and report your own content on your own site. It allows people to monitor anything new you publish, all from their RSS aggregator, such as Outlook, Time Matters or a web service that offers such services. The more information on the internet authored members of the firm and about activities of the firm, the more "links" and the more opportunity for "click-throughs" that will reach your site.

Extending Websites

Most CMS platforms support "plug-ins" and "add-ons" that increase the functionality of your site. Many of these are free or available for a nominal cost. These add-ons range from interactive forums, to wikis and project management systems, to image galleries, streaming videos and link directories. Not only is a CMS a good platform to commence web development with, it's also a good platform to extend and grow with the needs of your practice.

SEO: The Art of Getting More Business

There seems to be a lingering belief that "if you build it, they will come". Heads up - they won't. Some results for Google searches:

- Attorney – 161 million results
- New York Attorney – 23.4 million results
- Patent Attorney – 2.55 million results
- New York Patent Attorney – 1.07 million results

With numbers like these, unless you pay for 'conventional marketing' or pay for advertising on other websites, they "will not come"; except, if you engage in Search Engine Optimization (or "SEO"). SEO is the concept of achieving "organic" rankings (as opposed to "paid" rankings, such as Google AdWords) in search engine results.

If you search on "New York Attorney", anyone on the first page is considered to have "first page ranking" for the keywords searched on (being "New York Attorney"). This is a very desirable thing. SEO is the art of targeting what searches you want to be found for, and getting on the first page of Google, Yahoo! and MSN when people search for that keyword or phrase.

With millions of searches done every day, first or second page ranking, can translate into a lot of new business leads coming in passively - people just finding your firm on the net and contacting you. From my own personal experience building our main website (<http://bashasys.com>), my blog (<http://bashasys.info>), our store (<http://store.bashasys.com>) and special product sites like Nebraska Probate System V (<http://forum.nebar.com/EE/>), I can personally attest to this phenomenon. Because of these websites, we have not done any marketing by direct mail or phone solicitations in over five years. I write my articles, update my sites and my clients find me; no longer do I rummage around to find them. Search for "HotDocs consultant" or "Time Matters consultant" and Basha Systems will show up on the first page. This result is no accident; it is the result of careful design and SEO.

Search Engine Mechanics & Myths

The age of the "directory" is over; long-live search! When you need something, where do you look? You look it up in Google. If you don't rank well in Google, it is unlikely you will be "found" unless you come with a personal referral. The point is that more and more people use the internet as their sole source for finding service providers.

No one can guarantee first page rankings on a search engine, not even the search engines themselves. You can pay for an "adwords" listing, but users know the difference between a paid result and an organic one. It is the difference between an "advertisement" and a public relations placement. The P.R. placement is trusted; the advertisement is not.

Now to the fun part - some quick and dirty facts to know.

- *Search engines eat, breathe and live for one thing - text.* If it isn't in text on your website, it didn't happen as far as a search

engine is concerned. Graphics mean almost nothing. Sexy Flash® animation and eye candy coolness similarly mean nothing. These things are great for the user experience, but mean zilch to a search engine. Text or it didn't happen.

- *Headings count.* Documents have structure - headings, titles, paragraphs, body text and the like. Web pages are documents, ergo, they should have structure. Titles and headings are well heeded by search engines.
- *Meta Keywords don't mean almost nothing.* For years, web designers abused the meta keywords tag in a website, so major search engines largely ignore them, if not completely. In fact, Google took over the search engine world because it ignored meta keywords and instead focused on actually 'reading' your pages.
- *Meta Descriptions are critical.* The Meta Description of a page, on the other hand, is quite often used by search engines as the excerpt that appears beneath the link. The content is used to achieve the search ranking, but the Meta Description is what the user sees in Google. It is a two-line marketing tool that you can use to entice people to click on your link.
- *Use a Site Map.* Search engines use site maps extensively; make sure you have one. They also use your navigation structure systematically, like a user who wanted to read every page of your site in sequence. If your navigation doesn't link to everything, the search engine doesn't get to everything and your net impact is reduced.

How to Exile your Website to SEO Siberia

Here's how you can make sure that no one finds your site by searching in a search engine.

- Use pretty graphics for your firm name and all headings on your pages. Don't use text.
- Employ navigation based solely on javascript or some other dynamic language (and pictures!). Don't use text.

About the Author: Seth Rowland, Esq. was named TechnoLawyer Consultant of the Year in 2002 for his contributions to TechnoLawyer on the subject of document assembly and law practice automation. He is a nationally known technologist whose company, Basha Systems, has helped many law firms build customized practice management and workflow solutions. To see the principal of SEO and CMS applies, please visit his main website, <http://bashasys.com> (powered by Joomla CMS), his blog, <http://bashasys.info> (powered by Expression Engine), and his webstore, <http://store.bashasys.com> (powered by Magento).

- Don't use heading tags (<h1>, <h2> and so on) in your website. Use pictures and formatted paragraphs.
- Don't bother with a site map. No one uses those things anyway.
- Go heavy with flash and animations because it looks good and catches the eye.
- Don't acquire links from other websites to your own. Networking and social networking can be safely ignored.
- Don't bother cross-referencing your own material. People don't want contextual links to other pages you have that are relevant; they can use the jazzy navigation menus.
- Don't use title and alt tags on images. Just because they are the only way you can attach text to an image is unimportant.
- Don't use titles on links in your content and always use "click here" instead. Search engines will automatically understand what "click here" refers to.
- Don't worry about "SEO Settings" in a CMS. The navigation systems will properly direct users to www.mysite.com/index.php?pid=89384&opt=2349893&sid=3948.

Summary

To acquire new clients passively, there is no better way than having good search engine results. To compete in search engine results, you need fresh, regularly updated, text-based content that is relevant, accurate, current and on topic. To keep a user once they've found your site, you need good navigation, site maps and current information. Without a CMS platform, this will take "days" of effort, and ongoing capital expenditures. With a CMS system, you can update your site in minutes, by yourself.

Regardless of what type of website you have, the search engine screw ups apply to you. If your website or CMS is doing some or all of these things, it is time to consider how to correct that. Get current, work with Web 2.0 and its new expectations. Always remember your new goal: To have a website that is easy to update, user friendly and ranks well in search engines.