

A Crash Course for Law Firm SEO

Most law firms and law firm marketers know that search engine optimization (SEO) is important, but they don't know what it really means and requires of them.

The good news is that, while some technical understanding of websites and search engines is necessary, so much of what we now call SEO refers to improving your website users' experiences.

If you've ever asked, "Is what I'm doing good or bad for SEO?", then you're not alone. It's a common question, even among seasoned marketers. But with very few exceptions, there's a better question you should be asking: "Is what I'm doing good or bad for my users?"

Why Today's SEO Is More About User Experience

SEO has changed dramatically over the years. In the early days of search engines, search engine specialists implemented several strategies to rank higher on search engines. Many of those strategies were intended to "trick" search engines into making websites more visible.

Fortunately, search engines are now far more sophisticated, which means that you stand little to no chance of tricking Google, Bing, or any other search engine into improving your website's ranking. The reason that's fortunate is because today's best search specialists climb up the rankings by providing the best user experience, which is a win-win for everyone.

Instead of worrying about how the pages on your website will be analyzed by search engines, you should instead focus mostly on how your users will experience and engage with your content.

How You Should Think About SEO

Too many marketers still focus on how they can make search engines happy with their content and websites. When that's your approach, you're always trying to hit a moving target.

Remember that search engines are on a never-ending quest to make their product as valuable as possible to their users. So, if you're focusing on creating content and websites that are best for your users, you and the search engines will be on the same journey, and you'll be less distracted by search engine algorithm updates and black hat SEO tactics (in SEO lingo, black hat means using practices against search engines' guidelines).

The following information can help marketers, attorneys, and law firm workers at all levels better understand how to strategize and execute a well-laid SEO plan. Though you might occasionally come across a term you're not familiar with, you'll learn why you (yes, *you*) can immediately improve your website's SEO game.

Before You Optimize, You'll Need a Few Basic Tools

Most of the optimizations you'll find below require few to no tools (we'll talk more about more advanced tools later on), but at the very least, you'll obviously need a website. The website will be built and maintained with a content management system (CMS).

In other words, if you have a website, you will use the CMS to optimize all the pages on your site. Popular law firm CMSs include WordPress, Wix, and Squarespace.

Within your CMS, you'll be able to make changes to many of the elements we describe below. Many CMSs can be even more user-friendly with the use of add-ons, which are like apps you install on your phone. Wix calls these add-ons "apps" and WordPress calls these add-ons "plugins."

If you're on a WordPress site, consider using the Yoast SEO plugin. The free version lets you make plenty of the optimizations we suggest below.

A website and access to your CMS is all you need to get started. Now that you have the tools you need, let's dive into the four pillars of SEO:

1. Technical SEO
2. On-page SEO
3. Content
4. Off-site SEO

We'll begin with the trickiest of the four pillars for non-SEO specialists: technical SEO.

Technical SEO

We now know that you'll be optimizing your site for users instead of search engines. **However**, there is one realm of SEO where this is slightly less intuitive than others.

Technical SEO is about the nuts and bolts of your website's SEO strategy. As the name implies, it's far more technical than the other three pillars of SEO. The following practices are best for your users, but knowing the best practices recommended by search engines will help you with this crucial aspect of SEO.

- Identifying crawling errors (pages that can't be found by search engines)
- Improving your webpage speed (making your pages load faster in browsers)
- Implementing schema markup (these are bits of code that enhance how a site is presented on search engine results pages, or SERPs)
- Identifying and addressing broken links (hyperlinks that don't work)
- Identifying and addressing 404 pages (missing pages)
- Ensuring the security of your site
- Create a sitemap (a page that displays all indexed pages on your website) • Plan out a site structure map (how your page will be navigated by users)

Before you get frustrated by the jargon and toss this guide into your recycling bin, know that some of these steps are more intuitive than you realize. For example, when you click on a link you've placed in the body text of a webpage, you expect it to take you somewhere. If it doesn't, then you want to fix it, either by removing it or including a link that does work. The same goes for missing pages (404s).

For the more hands-on aspects of technical SEO, like implementing schema markup, you'll need more advanced tutorials if you choose to do them yourself.

If you're considering asking an SEO specialist questions or seeking guidance from an outside consultant (or SEO-savvy friend), this is the one area you should focus on. Optimizing pages for site speed and including schema markup are technical processes, so don't hesitate to seek out help from the pros.

On-Page SEO

On-page SEO means optimizing the content on your webpage to make it as user-friendly as possible. This will also ensure you're on the same path as the search engines you're optimizing for (remember: all paths lead to your user). Though slightly more technical than your content strategy, on-page SEO is far more intuitive than technical SEO.

Here are a few of the best practices for optimizing your on-page content.

Keyword Optimization

What search queries do you want your webpage to rank for in search engines? This question will be central to your keyword optimization strategy. Be as literal as possible when creating your target keywords and key phrases. For example, if your page is about your firm's car accident lawyers, then you'll likely make "car accident lawyers" your focus keyword.

To help you decide the best choice of keyword, find a search volume checker, which can help you decide which terms are searched enough to warrant targeting. You can also review top competitors in your market to learn which keywords they're targeting.

Make sure your keywords and key phrases include your location, so users (and, yes, search engines) know where your practice is located. To take the example above, if your car accident lawyers practice in Fargo, North Dakota, then you might choose "Fargo car accident lawyers" as your target key phrase.

Your primary target key phrase can be used as your page's headline (more on that below) and included in the body of the content as needed, especially in calls to action.

It's also helpful to understand that cramming keywords into your content won't make it perform any better. Though "keyword stuffing" used to be an effective technique in the SEO world, today it might even signal to Google that your page is low quality. So include your focus keywords and key phrases throughout your pages, but do so as naturally as possible.

As you continue to expand the content on your site, keep your focus on the actual substance of your page. Consider what topics and subtopics to include on a webpage. As search engines evolve, keywords matter less and the entities (general topics) you cover become more important. Address the questions most likely to pertain to your future clients and talk about the ways in which your firm can help them.

Optimize Title Tags and Meta Descriptions

The title tag (or SEO title) is the name of your page as it's displayed on search engine results pages (SERPs). For pages that are essential to your site (about us pages or practice area pages), stick to using the keyword and location you're optimizing the page for. You can also include a separator (like a "|" or a "-") and then your firm's name.

If you have more informational content on your site, such as blogs or FAQs, your title tag will be similar to or an exact match with the page's h1 (your first header, aka the "headline").

Meta descriptions are the brief snippets of text that appear under the title tags in SERPs. Try to limit the number of characters to 155. Sum up your page as best as possible with the space you have. If you're writing a meta description for a service page (for law firms, that's a practice area page), then you can include a call to action by including your firm's phone number.

Here are a few other on-page SEO strategies that you can implement on your site.

- Keep your URLs short and descriptive

- Make sure your pages' headlines and subheadings are descriptive and helpful • Add descriptive tags to any images you use on the page

There's plenty of overlap between on-page SEO and our next topic, content. Think of them as two sides of the same coin, and know that your content should be written, reviewed, and posted with your users' needs in mind.

Content

The content on your site is what really drives your users' experience. Between the imagery and design of the page and the words you use, you'll be telling a story to your users. This your chance to inform your readers about your:

- Services
- Attorneys
- Staff members
- Community involvement efforts
- Case results
- Testimonials

Depending on the size and scale of your site, you can devote a section of your homepage, a page on your site, or an entire section of several pages to each of these elements.

In addition to informing website visitors about your law firm, you can also create more informational content in the form of blogs and frequently asked question pages. Though these types of content typically don't convert your visitors into immediate leads like pages about your services, they can demonstrate your expertise, raise your brand awareness, and educate your audience.

You can rely on many different types of content to augment the text-based content on your pages. Here are just a few examples:

- Videos
- Infographics
- PowerPoint presentations
- eBooks
- Newsletters
- Podcasts

When deciding how you approach the content on your site, make sure you understand your goals and create a content strategy around them. At the most basic level, you should strive to

put your firm's best foot forward by telling visitors about what makes you different than your competitors.

Speaking of your competitors, know that the pages on your site don't exist in a vacuum. The better your site's content, the more likely it will be to rank well on SERPs and drive leads to your firm.

The general rule in the content marketing world is to strive for *10x content*. That means your content will be 10 times better than your competitors. While that's a lofty goal, it speaks to the difficulty you'll face if you're in a competitive market. Getting to the top of SERPs means putting even more work than the people who created the top-performing and highest-ranking pages.

Off-Site SEO

Off-site SEO is also called link building, and it's a very different topic than it used to be. In years past, you could use all sorts of tactics to get other websites to place links that pointed their users toward your site, which served as a sort of "vote of confidence" in your website. However, crafty SEOs abused this system by using all sorts of black hat tactic to secure *backlinks* to their sites.

But now, Google ignores or deemphasizes many of the links online, so it's likely that the links old-school SEOs spent years building are no longer serving the purpose they use to. In fact, a growing trend among SEOs is disavowing links, which means telling Google to ignore the link back to their site to avoid any potential penalties from the search engine.

The best way to approach off-site SEO is to create great content, share it as widely as possible, and reach out to media outlets whenever your firm is doing or has achieved something newsworthy.

Note that Google still looks at the link profile (the body of links that point toward a website) of your site, and those links do matter. But the strategies people use to generate those links (guest blogging, placing links in forums, and directly paying other sites for them) will not be in the long-term interest of your site. Search engines are just too smart for these tactics.

You might come across some SEOs who recommend getting your website or your attorneys placed in directories, and there is some value in this. However, avoid any directories that aren't highly credible.

Focus on Your Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness

One of the most important topics in the search community concerns the experience, expertise, authority, and trustworthiness (E-E-A-T) of websites. As search engines refine algorithms, they are getting better at identifying and featuring the most credible, authoritative content possible.

This is incredibly important for law firms, as they are often providing services and information that Google considers “YMYL” (your money or your life). If a law firm provides inaccurate information, it could negatively affect the happiness, health, safety, or financial stability of readers, which Google makes all attempts to avoid.

Make sure that you’re providing great content to your website’s visitors, which means that it should be accurate and trustworthy. If it’s possible for a legal professional to write your site’s content, you should demonstrate that to readers by displaying their names on bylines and linking to your authors’ profile pages.

Even if you have a non-legal professional write content, you can still have a professional review it, which you can note on your page with a brief byline-like sentence that says “reviewed by [name of attorney or other legal professional].”

Next-Level SEO Tools

Many incredible tools are available to help you audit your site, find topics to write about, identify how users engage with your content, and measure your site’s performance. Some are free, some are paid, and some have limited free versions that still offer great value.

Though this warrants a guide on its own, let’s name just a few of the tools you should research and consider trying out:

- Google Analytics (GA4)
- Google Search Console
- Ahrefs
- SEMRush
- Moz
- Screaming Frog
- Hot Jar
- Crazy Egg

We highly suggest you first set up GA4 and Google Search Console accounts to link to your site so you can gather data about your site’s performance. After that, try free or trial versions of the other tools we mentioned to find out if they might benefit your website.

Set Objectives and Measure Your Results

As you begin the process of integrating SEO into your workflow, set goals. Those objectives should guide all of your decisions. For law firms, generating leads is often an essential goal. Generating traffic from search engines (organic traffic) might also be a top goal, and it's at the heart of SEO, as it also is in service of your lead generation efforts.

However, don't get lost in rabbit holes just because you hear SEO experts tout the benefits of a given trend in the search community. Know that SEO is simply a tool to help you achieve your goals.

Frequently review the performance of your website to determine if you're on course to meet your objectives. Ask yourself questions like:

- How many visitors come to my website every day or every week?
- How many of those visitors leave (bounce) without clicking on other pages or contacting my firm?
- Have I configured my measurement tool (Google Analytics) to accurately interpret and report users who filled out a form on my website or called my firm?
- Where do website visitors exit my site, and what can I do to keep them engaged?

These questions, and the many more you'll ask yourself throughout the process, are key to refining your SEO strategy.

Enjoy this process, and remember that SEO is ultimately about creating an excellent experience for your user that is aligned with your firm's business objectives.

About backdocket

At backdocket, our goal is to help small- to mid-size law firms grow their businesses. Our practice management software centralizes information, improves communication, automates tasks, and gives you an easy-to-navigate dashboard to help you become more organized and efficient.

If you'd like to schedule a free demonstration of backdocket, contact us today to get started.