

What Is SEO and Why Is It So Expensive

Listmates, I am sure this has been covered before but can someone please explain to me exactly what is search engine optimization and why I have to pay some company three or four hundred dollars or more each and every month to do it for my website. Any insight would be greatly appreciated.

SEO stands for "Snake (Electronic) Oil". It's expensive because extracting the oil from snakes has always been very labor-intensive.

But seriously, it stands for "Search Engine Optimization." It is marketed on the premise that you can "tweak" your website to maximize your position in search engine rankings.

While it is true that how your website is designed has a direct bearing on how effectively the content is indexed, it is also true that much of what is touted as "SEO" is really 1) iterative "diddling", 2) chasing the dragon of ever-changing search engine algorithms that are trying to avoid being "gamed" even as all sorts of marketers are trying to game them, and 3) in the worst of cases, turning your site into spam by posting links to you in blog responses, manually submitting you to all sorts of search engines and portal sites, and generally just trying to create more "presence," whether it's relevant to the nature of your practice or not.

The first and most important STEPS YOU CAN TAKE YOURSELF AT LITTLE OR NO COST include:

- Make your site relevant by adding content.
- Understand a little about HTML structure and use headings, bullets, and META tags appropriately (but not excessively; the search engines actually "know" to watch out for sites that are yelling).
- Make your site dynamic by making changes and adding content regularly, even if it's just adding breakout pages, articles, press releases, updated bios, etc. Search engines have a preference for new and fluid content.
- Add cross-references to your site to local resources and information that will help the search engine add geographic relevance to your content, and "tie" you to higher volume sites.
- If you read blogs related to your practice, make meaningful comments now and then, especially if they allow you to post your e-mail and web address in the response.
- If you have specialized content, consider doing courtesy "cross-links" or "link-backs" with other web owners or bloggers by reposting or referencing/abstracting the other's content with credit, or get added to their "blog roll" if you're a regular reader or contributor, or if they're a regular reader or contributor of yours.

There are a number of books (search the archives for references) that give some good fundamental information about foundational information that web

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crawlers (the "bots" that scan and index web sites for the search engines) look for and at, and our best guess as to how those elements may be rated. (And understand that those elements are constantly changing based on what the search engines consider to be the effectiveness of their searches based on user response, etc.)

If you're going to spend a few, or even a couple hundred bucks a month, you're probably better off spending it on targeted marketing or a competent developer to help expand the content and organization of your web site, rather than paying some tech in a cubicle somewhere to be constantly tweaking your search keywords and META tags.

My tuppence,

-Rick

Richard J. Rutledge, Jr., North Carolina

If you're defending your Ph.D. thesis, much time and effort is saved by extracting oil from the same snake you need to fight.
<http://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/faq-the-snake-fight-portion-of-your-thesis-defense>

James S. Tyre, California

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of making changes to an owner's website and attempting to secure valuable, contextually-related incoming links from other websites for the purpose of achieving higher search engine rankings for desired search terms.

Studies have shown that about 68% of the time or more users click on a link on the first page of the search results on Google and other search engines. As a result, the few law firms that receive first page rankings receive a disproportionately high amount of website traffic (and presumably new clients) therefrom. Conversely, law firms that are not listed on the first page of the search results are not seen (and are thus not considered) in the majority of website searches. As a result, many law firms have a huge financial incentive to be seen on the first page of the search results.

SEO is like any other form of marketing that works. At one time there were likely few firms that took out ads in phone books; as firms started to take out these ads and realize client development benefits, more firms started to take out ads, and the ads themselves also became larger. And more expensive.

Rick makes a number of excellent suggestions about actions that can be taken to improve search engine rankings. It's important to develop quality website content, and (for SEO purposes) this content should be developed around the search terms the prospective clients are likely to use.

Also, reading even a basic (non-coding) book about SEO will provide the reader with good advice about SEO. As Rick points out, SEO is continuously changing, as Google and other search engine companies are trying to weed out websites and companies that are trying to manipulate the search engine rankings. They are also trying to promote websites that do a good job with unique, valuable content, as well as websites that are being discussed in social media.

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For anyone considering hiring an SEO company, here are a few tips:

1. Understand exactly what is to be done. If the SEO firm won't tell you what they intend to do and explain the benefits of undertaking certain actions, don't use them.
2. SEO is a competitive process, as it necessarily involves trying to get high search engine rankings for specific terms. As a result, these terms need to be identified, and a competitive analysis should be undertaken to determine the best and most cost-effective strategy to get high rankings based upon the desired search terms. For example, if you want to get high rankings for "chicago car accident lawyer," you should first determine what websites are receiving high rankings for this term, and then understand what SEO efforts are being done by these websites. Do they have dozens of pages of content? Do they blog frequently or have video? Are they heavily involved in social media? Once an understanding has been developed around these aspects, an effective strategy can then be developed.
3. Because an understanding of the competitive nature is necessary, it's important to question any SEO company that proposes a set monthly amount without undertaking a competitive analysis, as it is simply impossible to begin to guess the level of work that will be required without first understanding the competitive market. It might be that \$500/month for a few months and then \$200 month thereafter might be sufficient to obtain and maintain top rankings. In a very competitive market, it might be that work requiring \$1,500/month for a year or more might be required.

As an analogy, consider a contract dispute matter. Before providing even a ballpark idea to a prospective client about the estimated cost of representation, an attorney would want to know as much information as possible to determine aspects such as the number of depositions likely to be required, whether experts are necessary, and how involved the matters are. A lawyer would never quote an estimated fee based simply on a matter being a contract dispute.

4. Do not use a company that simply promises to "get a lot of incoming links" to get high rankings. While for a long time this strategy did work; after the recent Google Penguin update in April, this strategy can backfire. Website owners who received a lot of incoming links from contextually unrelated websites (particularly foreign websites having nothing to do with the law), have seen their rankings decrease dramatically.
5. If the price sounds too good to be true, it probably is.
6. High rankings typically take time. The more competitive the legal environment is for a particular practice area, the longer it will probably take to achieve high rankings. If you practice in a very narrow specialized area with little competition, you might be able to get first page rankings very quickly and without a lot of SEO work; if you practice personal injury law in a large city, it will likely take much more work.
7. SEO strategies often involve matters such as creating blogs, video, significant content, internal linking (linking from text on one web page to another web page on the same website), social media, and other aspects. Again, to develop an optimal, cost-effective strategy, it's important to understand what the competition is doing.
8. If an SEO company alleges that they have a "special" relationship with Google for high rankings, hang up. Even Google notes it does not have any relationships with any companies for the organic (non-paid) listings.

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9. If a company promises first page rankings, beware. It may be that the terms for which first page rankings will be achieved are terms that are never used by clients. In many of these pitches the "first page rankings" are not for the organic rankings, but rather are for the paid advertisement listings (also called "pay-per-click" listings).

10. The best and most effective SEO strategies are developed over time. The suggestions that Rick makes about continuing to add new content, blog postings, etc. work well. If there are no or few incoming links to a website that has been live for many years and then suddenly there are 100 new links, Google will likely consider that this an attempt at search engine manipulation, and thus will not recognize the SEO efforts.

I hope that this is helpful.

Regards,

Jeff

Jeff Lantz, Rhode Island

I agree entirely with what Rick wrote on this. "SEO" is the latest (pardon the hyperbole) scam by the "we didn't make our millions in the dot com boom so now we're trying to trick you with another geeky service" crowd. DO NOT PAY A COMPANY TO DO THIS FOR YOU! You will pay a LOT of money for very little return (if any).

The best tip that Rick offered is to get you and your website listed on other services or sites, such as blogs, bar association referral sites, Facebook (make a FB page for your practice), twitter, LinkedIn, etc. etc. etc. If there are practice specific sites or related sites (for me, there are organizations like COPAA and Autism Society and Autism Speaks and Wrightslaw and others) where they will list your site. Each time your site is listed on another site, it improves your recognition by the search engines and thus puts your site higher up on search results . . . or, in other words, "SEO".

This takes time, but the effort and money you save from an outside company doing this for you will give you more a return than you will otherwise get. And it's not bad. Especially the ROI from blogs or articles you write.

TJ

Robert C "TJ" Thurston, Pennsylvania

Jeff and Rick gave you some great advice. I'll add that in my experience - and we do NOT do SEO work - 90% of the SEO companies out there are charlatans. There are a few really good ones and the rest are people who over-promise and under-deliver.

Two of the very common tricks that the scammers will use are:

1. Flood every blog they can find - including blogs that have absolutely nothing to do with law or your practice - with spam comments that include links back to your site. I get hundreds of those to our company blog every week - our blog comments are moderated so none of them ever see the light of day and just end up getting submitted to a giant blacklist.

2. Set up bogus websites of their own that are simply link farms - long lists of links to sites that they're trying to boost. These scammers often work together and trade links - so maybe your scammer has 50 bogus link farm pages and in exchange for posting links for other scammers on his pages, he gets those other scammers to post his links to their pages. Google has largely caught on to this trick.

One tactic used by SEO companies that are LEGIT is that they will seek out and find sites that ARE relevant to your practice area and contact those webmasters to ask about linking to your site. Sometimes it's free and sometimes they pay a small fee to the webmaster to add the link. I get contacted about adding links to my OfficeForLawyers.com site all the time - I generally decline unless the site they want me to link to seems relevant and of good quality.

That said, there's really nothing that an SEO company can do for you that you can't do yourself - other than maybe provide a little expertise and experience to the process. And as above...the vast majority of SEO companies I've met are scams. Either mills using unethical tactics like comment spam and link farms or somebody who read "SEO for Dummies" and decided to make a few bucks doing it on the side.

Just to reinforce what I think Jeff and Rick said...anybody who promises to get and keep you at the top of Google's rankings is lying to you. Dead stop.

One other thing to consider - even with the legit folks - if you're not their only client in your category then they have a bit of a conflict of interest. They're trying to get you to the top of the rankings but they're also trying to get one or more of your competitors to the top of the rankings. You can't both be listed #1....

Disclaimer: Did I mention we do NOT do SEO work? We also don't practice law.

Ben M. Schorr, Arizona

Even though our company's services include SEO, I would tend to agree with Ben's assessment that there are a lot of charlatans in the industry (I'm not sure if it's 90%, but it's definitely too high). Unfortunately, too many people have gotten ripped off, particularly by companies that make unrealistic guarantees and (in some cases) companies that have engaged in "black hat" techniques.

I would disagree with TJ's assessment that SEO is a scam. For many law firms, first page placement on the search results pages leads to a huge amount of business. There are law firms that spend tens of thousands of dollars per year in SEO efforts, and who are increasing (rather than decreasing) SEO spend. The reason is very simple - for them, SEO works. They are getting high dollar cases or a large volume of

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a work as a result, so it makes sense to continue to invest additional dollars in the efforts that are working.

The value of SEO is dependent upon the value of having high rankings and the cases and matters that get generated therefrom. The more that clients for the services offered by a firm use the Internet to find an attorney, and the more that the matters are worth, the higher the SEO value.

Can you do SEO yourself, or should you hire an SEO company? The answer to this depends - do you want to spend the time and learn about how to do SEO well, and then to undertake the activities? Or would you rather be practicing law and pay someone else (hopefully at a much lower hourly rate than what you charge)?

Some lawyers like to do SEO, and are good at it. Some also enjoy (and are skilled at) doing home repairs, and would rather perform these repairs themselves than hire a plumber or electrician. So, I think in large part whether to do SEO yourself or hire someone else is a personal choice.

This being said, there is also the alternative of doing some SEO yourself and hiring an SEO company to do additional work (or at least assist in developing a strategy) As Rick notes, writing and adding content frequently to a website (particularly in the form of blog postings) can be easily done and will be helpful. Thus for attorneys that are interested in doing some (even a large part) of the SEO for their website themselves, it might be helpful to work with an SEO company on a limited basis to get some insight on an SEO strategy that will make the best use of an attorney's time.

Regards,

Jeff

Jeff Lantz

Here is everything you need to know and do about SEO.

Make a list of the top 20 questions that people ask about your practice area. Write 20 blog posts that answer those questions. Then, make 20 videos and post them to YouTube. Include a link to your site in the video descriptions.

It's probably a good idea to write one post aimed at a consumer audience, and another post aimed at professionals. Don't post them one after the other. It's probably better to go through the list once for consumers and then once for professionals. But, after you've written both, go back and link them to each other. i.e. "For a more detailed [or more basic] explanation, read my 'attorney's guide to probate.'"

Then, approach other blogs and ask to write a post for their blog as a guest. Ask that the blog post link back to your site. It's best if the link includes a keyword that people search for. For example, I might post a bio that says "David is an Orange County estate planning attorney."

Do this for the rest of your career.

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Even a little bit of this will move you to the top of Google for most keywords in our industry. If you aren't sure what questions people are asking, go on Avvo and look.

Cheers,

David Allen Hiersekorn, California

Good advice given by all.

My only addition is that it is worth paying a respectable SEO company to help track and report on metrics, at least initially. If they're good, they'll be able to show you useful data and help you pinpoint your SEO efforts to get results. I worked for a company that did that, and was strictly hired on the basis of being able to write a complete, and coherent sentence. I read "SEO for Dummies" to learn what the heck SEO was. This was in 2005 so SEO wasn't the common denominator it is now. I much prefer the Idiot's Guides, but there wasn't one for SEO, and I got too easily distracted by all the stuff I didn't know on Search Engine Watch.

Search Engine Watch is a good reference, btw. As is Search Engine Land, if looking for other reading material. Nice list of resources on seinsights.net, too.

Otherwise, read SEO For Dummies and heed the advice already given.

Non-lawyer briefly reminiscing about her SEO days.

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Thanks and best regards,

Gwynne Monahan
