DOES YOUR WEBSITE **CLICK** WITH CLIENTS?

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Recent changes in Google's search engine may leave your website in the dust. Marketing your law firm in one well-managed site can ensure that potential clients know who you are and how you can help.

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MANY LAWYERS WONDER

how search engines like Google affect a law firm's ability to attract cases online. How do the search engines choose what to display? What can you do to improve your chances of being found online and contacted by a potential client? A complete answer to those questions would require volumes of technical detail, but this article offers a simplified explanation of recent updates to Google's search engine algorithm[1] and how you can avoid getting lost in the search result shuffle. By integrating your efforts, you can build a powerful, result-oriented online brand for your firm.

The simplest way to understand Google's recent algorithm updates is that they represent a shift from quantity to quality. When it comes to websites that a search engine sees as relevant, quality means cutting through attempts to cheat the system (by websites that misrepresent themselves as credible) and returning only the most suitable results to the end user.

Google has been refining its algorithm for years for two important reasons: to improve customers' user experience and to maintain an unheard-of market share—nearly 70 percent—that it has maintained for more than a decade.[2]

In February 2011, Google began to implement two major algorithm updates known as Panda and Penguin. Panda was released first as a series of adjustments to the algorithm that assessed elements of each website's design and content. Sites with content and usability that did not rely on tricks to fool search engines were recognized as credible and therefore were listed higher in the search results. When the new algorithm was implemented, CNET reported a surge in the rankings of news websites and social

networking sites and a drop in rankings for sites containing large amounts of advertising.[3]

The second update, Penguin, was announced in April 2012. It was aimed squarely at techniques websites used to link content from one site to another, creating the appearance that a website was popular or reputable. These so-called "black hat" techniques include practices known as stuffing, cloaking, link networking, and content duplication, all of which violate Google's published Webmaster Guidelines.[4]

Many online firms were caught off guard in Google's rollout of Penguin because they used secondary websites known as "landing pages" or "doorway sites." These pages traditionally are used to track advertisement conversion. While they are not malicious in nature and not spam, the Google algorithm lowered the search results of the firms' main websites because it detected these secondary sites.

The latest update, Hummingbird, was announced in October 2013. While it builds on the Panda and Penguin updates, it really is a new algorithm. Like the bird for which it is named, Google considers the algorithm to be fast and precise. It brings natural language or "conversational search" to the forefront, driven by search queries spoken into your phone.

For example, in a search for "What's the closest place to buy the iPhone 5s to my home?" a traditional search engine might focus on finding matches for words ("buy" and "iPhone 5s"). Hummingbird focuses more on the meaning behind the words and how content is written on Web pages. One thing is clear: This update is even more focused on consumer behavior and intent than purely matching keywords, moving the focus closer to the quality of a user's experience.

In sum, these recent updates reflect

a comprehensive effort by Google to penalize website owners who took shortcuts to fool the search engine and to reward those who focused on producing a higher-quality site. But have these updates left your firm's website behind? If so, what action should you take? The answer is that you should put your resources behind one powerful website that gives consumers and search

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engines a clear and complete picture of your practice.

Online Marketing Fundamentals
In an environment where technological factors constantly change, certain fundamental principles may be the only thing that will save you. Fundamental principles of consumer behavior and consumer marketing are key—looking not so much at the technology itself but how consumers interact with it.

Website quality. The subjective term "quality" encompasses the elements of your website that a search engine algorithm measures. Quality is not a yes-or-no question but a question of how much. How closely related is page content to what it says it is? How would a user navigate the pages? What do users see first? What is seen only by the search engine? The algorithm cannot look at your site and assess quality of design, but it can look for common structural errors in programming that make a page look sloppy, difficult to read, or misleading. These determinations may invoke a quality penalty that hurts your search results. Staying current with these changes requires constant monitoring. The key is to identify factors that affect your quality score before they become a problem. That means using well-known navigation practices (known as "user experience" in the industry) that allow potential clients to quickly and easily find what they are looking for.

Content development. A fundamental attribute of your website's content is relevance. As Google has continuously refined its algorithm, it rewards relevant content that can be said to be the primary factor in a search—that "content is king." Before the Panda update, many vendors attempted to use tricks to give a site's content the appearance of relevance, such as continuously adding new pages. This practice became so widespread that unscrupulous programmers

created automatic programs (known as "bots") to steal content from one site, graft it onto their client's site, and use code to make it seem like the originator was the copycat.

But Google got smarter. Panda no longer considers the continual addition of new pages to be an indicator of authority. Instead, it looks for relevant updates to your most prominent pages to assess a site's commitment to the user experience. If the people responsible for your website did not adjust to this change, your firm could be penalized for having what Google sees as lower-quality content. The answer is to ensure that your firm's website content is developed for your potential clients (not the search engines) and is original; it is wise to ensure that at least 80 percent of the content is unique.[5]
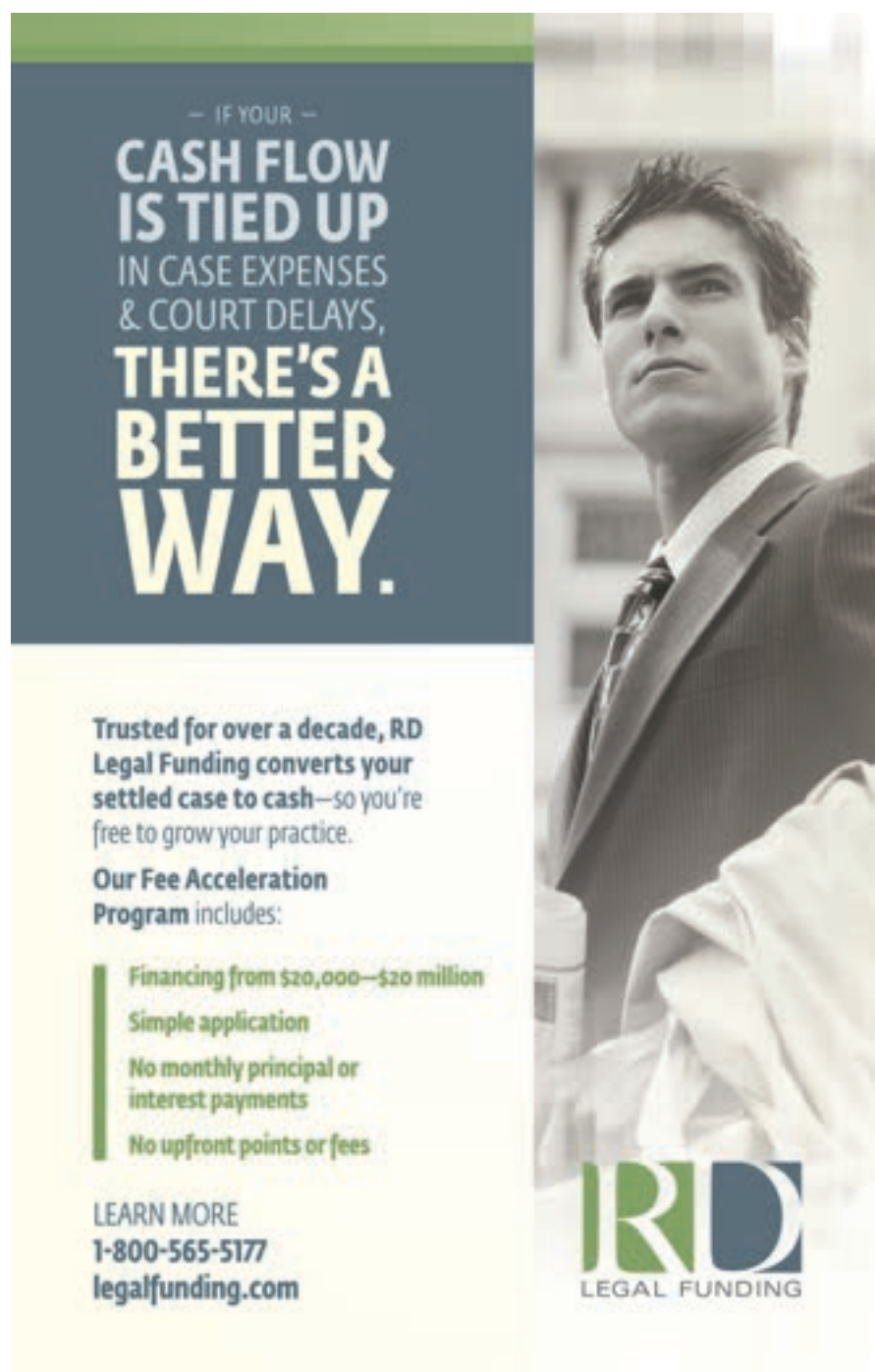
Usability. There is some advanced science behind Web usability, as a Google search for the terms "eye tracking" and "heat mapping" will confirm. But I recommend a search that focuses on your firm—looking up what is known as your "bounce rate." This statistic gets its name from the occasions when a visitor leaves a site without going to any other page except the one to which they were directed from the search; the bounce occurs when a user leaves the site via the computer's "back" button.

Bounced website visitors almost certainly will go to another website—your competitor's. If your page is not structured well, and visitors do not see what they are looking for quickly, they will use the dreaded back button. Knowing what your prospects expect to see requires looking at the content from a perspective other than that of an attorney. If your designer or programmer doesn't have that expertise, you will not know whether the site will be usable by potential clients.

Navigation design and information hierarchy are just two factors that influence bounce rate. In general, a 50 percent bounce rate is average, higher than 60 percent is cause for concern, and you have real problems if you cross the 80 percent threshold. If you do nothing else after reading this article, check your bounce rate.

Search engine optimization. Also known as SEO, search engine optimization means you must consider everything a search engine gets from your site—how it is structured and coded, as well as how your social media and blog are linked to the site. Because Google

continuously tweaks its algorithm, the business of SEO has continuously changed and expanded. How can you cope with this change? By remembering the fundamentals, that the change in Panda and Penguin is quality over quantity, and that Hummingbird encourages you to write for potential clients, not the search engines. Before these updates, the quantity of links that pointed to your site helped you optimize. Now, if those links are judged to be generated by bots or are of low quality, you will be penalized.

The Penguin update sees through gimmicks created by programmers, but the top SEO problem for attorneys is one they created through the proliferation of separate, stand-alone practice area sites. For example, if the hypothetical lawyer Jane Doe in Springfield not only has her own site at www.AttorneyJaneDoe.com but also created two other websites—SpringfieldTruckAccidentLawyer.com and SpringfieldMotorcycleAccidents.com—none of the sites would be highly ranked in a Google search.

In short, this quantity-first approach no longer works because when you spread your authority across multiple sites, you will lose ground to firms that use the single-site approach that Google treats as optimal. Less is more. Find fewer websites that are of higher quality and authority to link back to your website. Resist the urge to just keep adding content; rather, refresh the content on your main pages from time to time.

Your online brand. If SEO is a culmination of all the technical aspects of how your site works, the remaining territory belongs to your online brand. The brand is where the technical side of your website falls away and what's left is the user as a person. Your brand is how your firm becomes both recognizable and memorable, in a way that inspires trust at first glance and, more important, keeps visitors engaged long enough that they contact you.

The easy part about supporting your brand is that you've established your role, because your brand is a reflection of what your practice actually is and does. The hard part is finding the best partner to help you communicate those elements. Most attorneys wind up entrusting their Web provider with this task, but Web firms and other online marketing service providers are technical experts. That means their qualifications may end at technology—exactly where the influence of your brand should start.

Integrating Multiple Vendors

A high-quality website is just one part of successful online marketing. Many online vendors are specialists in one area or another, but the newer quality-focused Google algorithm can result in one vendor's action thwarting another's.

Consider this hypothetical example: A pay-per-click (PPC) vendor may be concerned only with showing you that site traffic and inquiries are being generated from their campaign. They may invoke a technique called dynamic page generation, which makes many different

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Web pages with the same topic (the law firm), so they have more terms they can include in the PPC campaign. But unknown to either them or you, duplicating topical content across dozens of pages improperly can invoke a penalty as a violation of the Webmaster Guidelines, leading to a lower overall search ranking for the main site despite the fact that the main site itself was not changed.

This is an issue of responsibility and coordination. Today, you must have a point person in charge of all online marketing activities who can manage the entire process and carefully examine each new activity to make sure it is in sync with what Panda, Penguin, and Hummingbird prescribe.

Getting to Google's page one is a game of inches, but the results can be measured in miles. Identify the right point person for your website and ensure that he or she is involved with all website decisions, vendors, and other changes in advance.

Considering Clients

A law firm's single biggest challenge may be how it handles online inquiries. Firms that are active with advertising and other outbound marketing are accustomed to a high number of inquiries, and they have personnel and processes to handle them. Firms that do not rely on this type of marketing may not respond as quickly

as consumers expect. My experience is that law firms have only an hour or so to respond to inquiries. Potential clients may attempt to contact as many as three firms but likely will stop once they make a connection with someone they believe can help them.

The answer? Remember that your brand is where the user (not a search engine, PPC campaign, database, or link directory) has the final say. Be sure you speak the user's language. At this point, good Web design can cut through the clutter. Put yourself in the client's shoes and take a hard look at the quality of your website. Ask yourself these questions about your firm's website:

- Is it relevant?
- Is the information original?
- Is the data current?
- Is the website an accurate reflection

of what your firm represents?

Be honest and be critical. That's exactly what the potential client will do when choosing a lawyer. ▣

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NOTES

1. For a typical query, there are thousands, if not millions, of Web pages with helpful information. Algorithms are computer processes and formulas that take your questions and turn them into answers. Google's algorithms rely on more than 200 unique signals or clues to guess what users are looking for.
2. Google had a market share of 66.7 percent in a survey issued in June 2013. *See* Press Release, comScore Releases July 2013 U.S. Search Engine Rankings (Aug. 14, 2013), www.comscore.com/Insights/Press_Releases/2013/8/comScore_Releases_July_2013_U.S._Search_Engine_Rankings.
3. Declan McCullagh, *Testing Google's Panda Algorithm: CNET Analysis*, CNET (Apr. 18, 2011), http://news.cnet.com/8301-31921_3-20054797-281.html.
4. Google, Webmaster Guidelines, https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/35769?hl=en. In one example of "keyword stuffing," content appeared on a website 28 times, and in each instance it was linked to the datsyn.com/how-it-works page. "Cloaking" is a technique in which information presented to the user on a Web page is different from the information presented to a search engine spider crawling the page. "Link networking" (also known as link farms) involves link builders and link brokers who put links to a site on shoddy, questionable websites. Finally, "content duplication" involves content repurposed from an existing website to your site or repeated on multiple sites.
5. Check the originality of your firm's website content by visiting Copyscape at www.copyscape.com.