Strategic
LAW FIRM
SEO

A Guide to Modern Search Engine Optimization Strategy for Law Firms

FREE PREVIEW

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Introduction

In 2008, my company, Work Media LLC, released a book called The Law Firm Internet Marketing Book. It was a nothing-held-back-here's-how-you-do-it kind of book, and if you don't mind my saying so, it was good. The book was very well-received, and it was definitely helpful in growing our business and its baby sister, Virtuoso Legal Marketing.

The problem with the book, just like anything to do with the Internet, is that it was out-dated overnight. And of course, the older the book got, the less correct the information. So one day we decided that it was time to bite the bullet and write The Law Firm Internet Marketing Book, 2nd Edition.

This time around, writing the book was like pulling teeth. When we wrote the first one, we had plenty of time on our hands for writing. Now I am fortunate to be busy engaged in the business of website promotion, but it doesn't really leave much time for book writing. I just wasn't inspired to update the book.

After taking a good long re-read of it, it occurred to me that I had a mistake by including certain step-by-step directions for things like managing Google AdWords campaigns, and by making certain specific software recommendations. The book needed to be more focused on driving organic search engine traffic to your website; and it needed to more strategic than tactical.

And it needed to be more interesting.

The result of this thinking was the decision to abandon the idea of a 2nd edition of the original book (at least for the time being) and start a new book solely focused on the process of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for law firms. Some of the content here was ported over from the original book. Certain concepts are still exactly the same, so there's no reason to re-invent the wheel. But much of what's here is new. If you bought the Law Firm Internet Marketing Book, fear not - there is much for you to learn here.

You hold in your hands a finely-tuned, highly focused tome on the subject of Strategic Law Firm SEO.

Law firm SEO in concept is not greatly different from SEO for any type of business, but there are certain resources and certain ways of doing things that apply specifically to those in the legal industry. This book will give you all the information you need to orchestrate a successful SEO campaign. But be forewarned from the start:

SEO is a lot of work.

If you don't have the time to do this, seek out a qualified SEO company to do it for you. Having read this book, you will know what companies actually know what they are talking about and which ones are full of shit. For some of you, this may end up being the most important thing to learn.

But I digress.

If you take the time to implement the tactics used here, you will be successful. Your website will rise in search rankings. Traffic to your website will increase. You will generate leads and close more business.

So sit back, relax, and let me tell you about the wonderful world of law firm SEO.

Why Search Engine Rankings Are So Important

Before we really get down to business, I think it's important that you understand exactly why it is so important to get your website ranked as high as possible in search engine results pages. Well here it is.

Just "getting ranked" ain't good enough.

Check this out.

A 2006 study conducted at Cornell University resulted in the following data regarding the percentage of clicks that the top ten search results on a Google search results page received:

% of SERP Clicks

% of Clicks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	56.36	13.45	9.82%	4.00%	4.73%	3.27%	0.36%	2.91%	1.45%	2.55%

◆ % of Clicks   ----- Trend
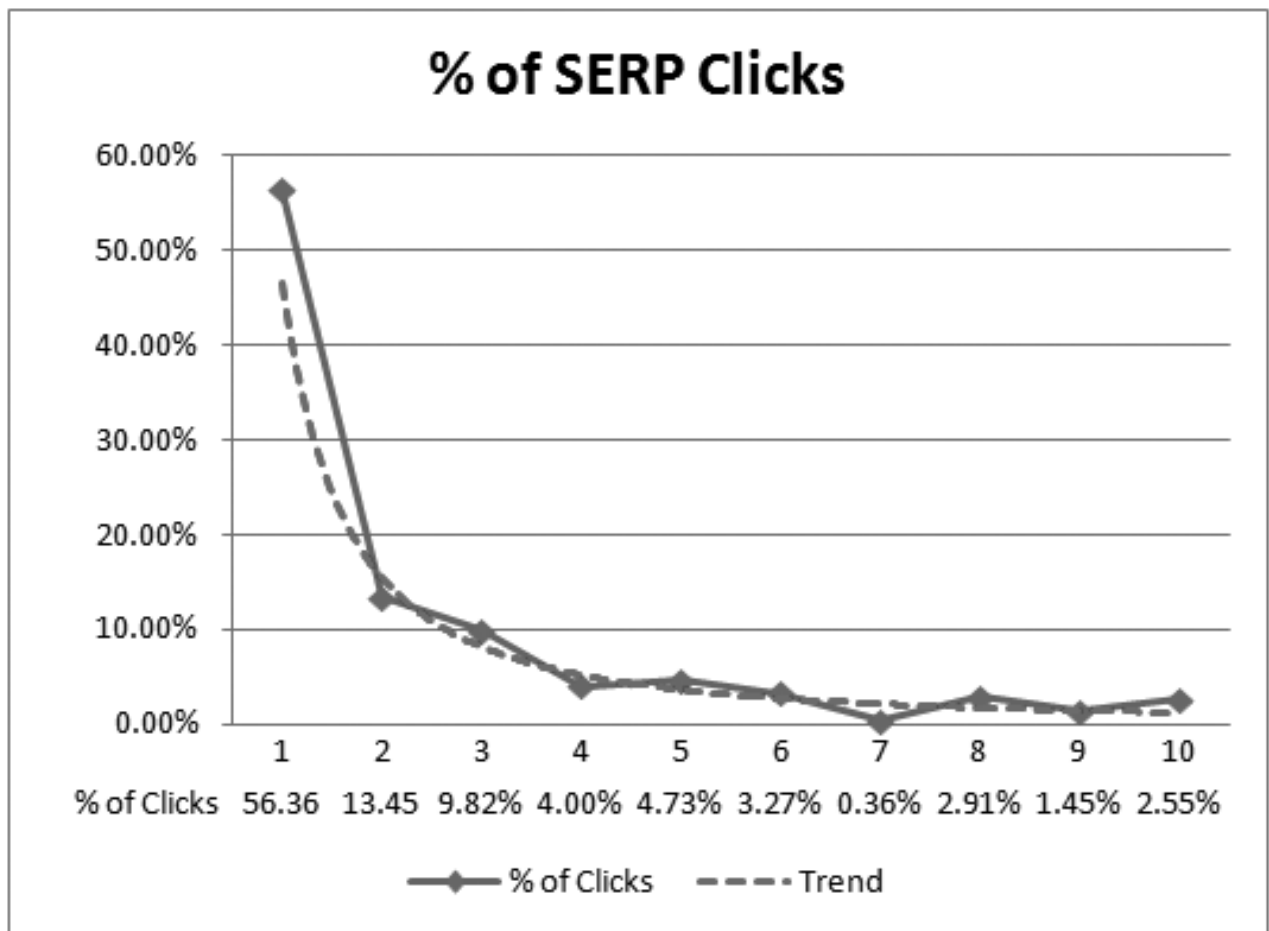
Source: http://www.cs.cornell.edu/People/tj/publications/granka_etal_04a.pdf

Similarly, an analysis of search behavior data released by AOL in 2006 revealed the following data:

Number of Clicks

Source: http://www.redcardinal.ie/search-engine-optimisation/12-08-2006/clickthrough-analysis-of-aol-datatgz/
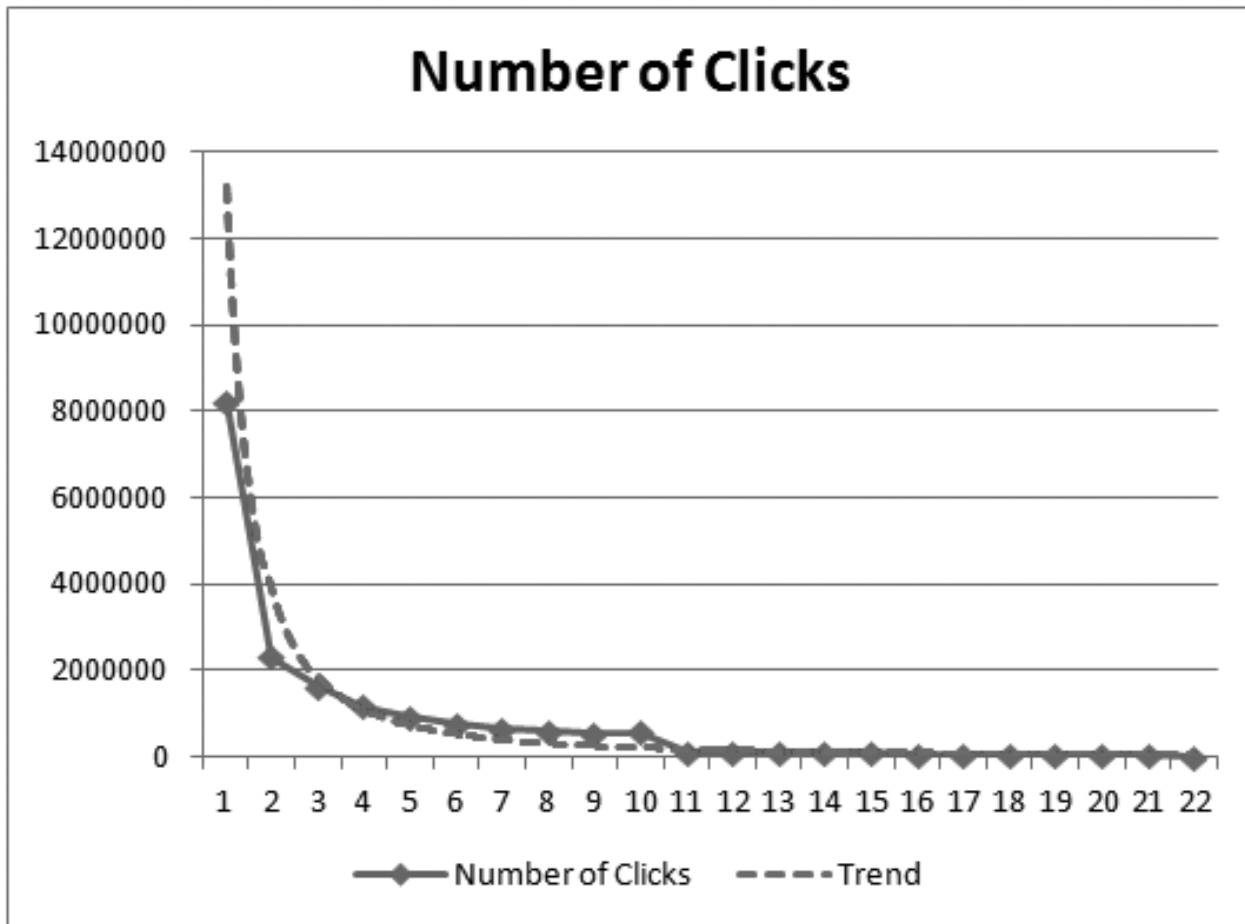
As you can see, there is a world of difference between being on page one and on page two, and there is definitely an advantage to being higher on the page. You want your search engine rankings to be as high as possible! So now that we have shown you why this is so important, let's dive into the world of SEO and teach you everything you need to know to get your website highly ranked.

SEO

SEO stands for Search Engine Optimization. I define it as the process of performing certain activities to cause a web page to rank highly in search engines for specific keywords. SEO is just one part of an overall Internet marketing campaign. There is another term, Search Engine Marketing, or "SEM", that sometimes gets used interchangeably (incorrectly) with SEO. SEM is sort-of an umbrella term representing many different parts of an Internet marketing campaign. It is also sometimes used to mean paid search marketing.

In the first iteration of this book, we discussed things such as paid search marketing and email marketing. This time around, our focus is solely on SEO, with a little social media thrown in. I do think you should be doing paid search, email, social media, and all the rest. But SEO must be the heart of your Internet marketing campaign. So that's what our focus will be.

Specificity is the key to successful SEO, and it's a factor in this process that many people just don't grasp. You can't expect your website to just appear number one in Google for any random search query, even if you are engaging in SEO. What you've got to do is decide in advance the keywords for which your website should rank, and then optimize and promote your website FOR THOSE SPECIFIC KEYWORDS.

I don't know how many times I've seen a law firm website home page that made no mention of the firm's market area or even its practice areas. Sometimes not even an address. And then they wonder why their website doesn't appear in Google. You've got to OPTIMIZE your website for the markets and practice areas that are relevant to your business. We will shortly get into the specifics of how to do that.

Three Categories of SEO

When we wrote the original Law Firm Internet Marketing Book, we discussed that there were two categories of SEO: "on-page" and "off-page." Since that time, a third category of SEO has become very prominent and important to a successful law firm SEO campaign: local search optimization. So here is a table comparing some of the activities performed in each of the three categories:

On-Page	*Off-Page*	*Local*
• *Optimizing code* • *Writing copy* • *Internal link structure* • *Optimizing page titles, headers and other page elements*	• *Reciprocal linking* • *Directory submissions* • *Article writing* • *Blogging* • *Social bookmarking*	• *Setting up accounts at local business directories* • *Getting customer testimonials* • *Getting links from local directories*

In other words:

On-site optimization is modifying the code, copy, and structure of a web page to rank specifically for a certain keyword or keywords. Off-site optimization is the process of building a catalog of inbound links to a website to increase its search engine rankings. Local search optimization is doing things to cause your website to appear prominently in local search results for your services.

Keyword Research: Step 1 in your SEO Campaign

Before you can properly optimize your website, you need to know specifically what search phrases you are optimizing for. When you type a phrase into a search engine such as Google and click the button, it will likely be reported back that there are millions of results for that phrase. Given that situation, it seems like it would be impossible to beat out all those other sites for the top spots. But in reality, you are really only competing against those sites that are specifically optimized for that phrase. Sure, there are millions of sites that use the phrase or part of it, but there may be very few that are actually optimized for it. That's how you can win the game – by picking specific search phrases related to the services you offer, and strategically optimizing your site for them.

For example, at the time of this writing, if we search Google for the phrase "Tampa Bay accident lawyer," Google says there are 10.4 million results. But if we change the search to "allintitle:Tampa Bay accident lawyer," then our total results declines to 163! That is quite a difference. Using "allintitle:" as the first part of your search query returns results only for web pages that have that specific search query in their titles. Titles are one of the most important things Google looks at when ranking web pages, so the number of pages that have the exact query in their titles is a better gauge of the number of pages that are optimized for that phrase. It's a more true measure of competition.

Search Results for "Tampa Bay accident lawyer": 10,400,000

What a Difference!

This means there are really about 163 competing websites for the keyword, NOT 10 million.

Search Results for "allintitle:Tampa Bay accident lawyer": 163
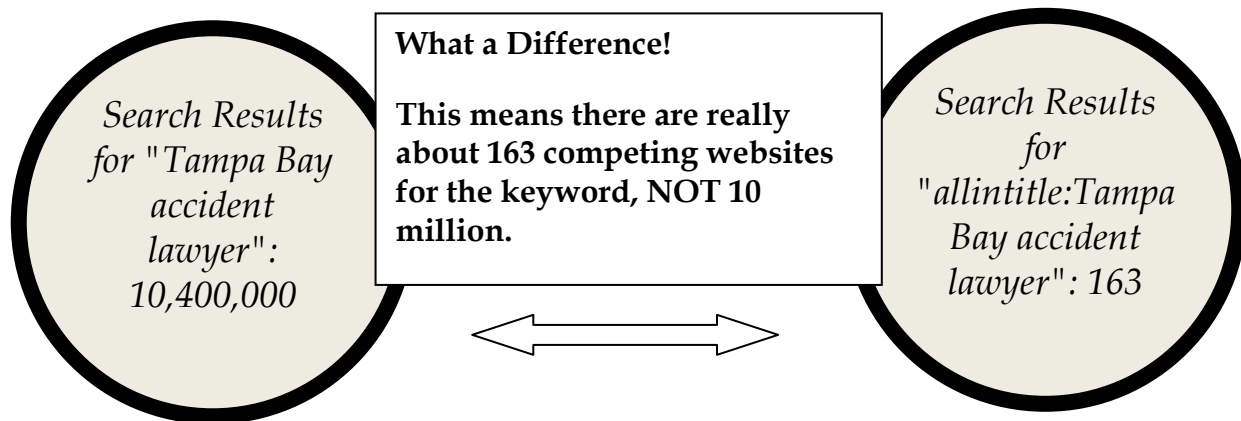
So in this example, there are only 163 web pages in Google's index that actually use that exact phrase in their title. That is a more accurate estimate of the number of sites you would really be competing against for that particular keyword.

You can really only highly optimize a single web page for a couple of search phrases. This is because the keywords MUST be used in the title for a web page to be optimized, and you should cap the number of words in your title at not much more than ten. What we recommend is picking one core phrase to aggressively optimize for and then one or two related phrases to optimize for secondarily.

One technique to optimize for more than one phrase is to combine phrases. For example, if you are a law firm based in St. Louis, you might choose to target the phrases "St. Louis personal injury lawyer" and "personal injury lawyer Missouri." You can combine these phrases for SEO purposes into "St. Louis personal injury lawyer Missouri." If this phrase appears in a web page title, then the title is optimized for both of them.

Strategic Law Firm SEO

Keyword Criteria:

1. *Highly relevant*

2. *Good traffic*

3. *Minimum competition*

As you can see, promoting your website for the right keywords is very important. Given that there is a limit to the number of keywords for which you can optimize your website, you should focus on keywords that have a high likelihood of generating targeted traffic to your website. When Virtuoso Legal Marketing is conducting keyword research for one of our clients, we look for keywords that meet three primary criteria:

- They are highly relevant. This seems obvious, but many business owners tend to stretch the meaning of "relevant." If you specialize in cases involving social security in Baltimore, Maryland, "social security" is not an appropriate keyword. "Social security lawyer" is relevant, but difficult; "Baltimore social security lawyer" is even more relevant and more realistic.

- They generate adequate traffic. Regardless of how relevant a keyword, if it represents a search phrase that is NEVER used, you're not really accomplishing anything. Don't forget the reason for doing all of this in the first place - to generate traffic to your website, and then leads for your firm. No traffic, no leads. But a warning: don't get greedy. You have to balance the potential traffic against the amount of effort required to achieve a high search ranking for the keyword.

- They are in a reasonable competitive situation. As of the time of this writing, if I do a search for "social security lawyer," Google returns 21 million results - astronomical, but not a true representation of competition. If we do an **allintitle:** search for the same thing, we get 395 thousand results. That is a much more realistic measure of competition. But still a very large number of websites to compete against. If I do an **allintitle:** search for "Baltimore social security lawyer," I get 322 results. Now that is a number we can deal with!

- BONUS Criteria: if you already have search engine rankings for any keywords that meet the traffic criteria, then those are excellent candidates for optimization. Any good keyword for which you are in the top 30 or 40 should be targeted.

To put it another way (the shaded blocks are what you want):

	Low	High
Relevance		x
Traffic		x
Competition	x	

As another example, let's say you are considering the following two keywords:

Keyword A	Keyword B
Expected traffic: 10,000 visits / month Direct competitors: 500,000	Expected traffic: 1,000 visits/month Direct competitors: 500

So which keyword is better? Keyword B. Sure, keyword A gets much more traffic, but with so many directly competing sites, it may take a long time to achieve a high search engine ranking, if you ever do. Keyword B, even though it gets less traffic, is in a much less competitive situation, so your chances of achieving a high search engine ranking for that keyword are much better.

There is another very good reason to use more targeted, specific keywords, and that is that those keywords reflect prospects farther along in the decision making process. In other words, just because someone is searching for "lawyer" does not mean that they are looking for help with the kind of law you practice. If someone is searching for "New York lawyer" and you practice in New York, then there is at least a geographic connection between you and the prospect, but the person still may not be a good match for your firm. But if one of your main areas of practice is maritime injury in the city of New Orleans, and someone searches for "New Orleans maritime injury lawyer", then that is a perfect fit. To get the greatest leverage from your time, focus your search engine optimization efforts on getting your site ranked for keywords that would be used by someone specifically looking for the kinds of law you practice.

Are you convinced of the importance of keyword research? Good. One more thing: do your keyword research BEFORE you write your website copy. You will want to emphasize your keywords in the copy. We'll talk more about how to do that later.

Sources of Keyword Data

The following list consists of some of the best ways to generate keywords to test and analyze for your search marketing campaigns:

- Search engine keyword tools. The major search engines each have their own research tools that bring back keyword data based on searches performed in that search engine. This is a great way to get started compiling your keyword lists. Google's external keyword tool shows actual traffic numbers for the keywords, which has moved it to the top of our list of preferred tools. You can access it at the following URL:

  https://adwords.google.com/select/KeywordToolExternal.

  If the above URL doesn't work when you try it, just search Google for "Google external keyword tool."

- Comb your website for keywords. If you have taken the time to write good copy for your website, then you already have a lot of keywords to start with. Every different way you have described your firm's services on your site is a new keyword or set of keywords. One problem is that the way you talk about your firm may not be the way your clients talk. That's why the next source is important.

- Think from your clients' perspective. Are the words you use to describe your firm really the way other people would describe it? Whatever words people are using to search for law firms in your areas of practice are the words you need to target, regardless of what terms are used in the industry.

- Look at your competition. If you have competitors who tend to rank very well, then look at what keywords they are optimized for. While you're at it, see if you can figure out what they have done to be successful. Then borrow from that and improve upon it.

- Look at your analytics to see what search terms people are currently using to find your website. This is critical data that few businesses tap into. If people are already using particular keywords to find your site, then those keywords likely warrant extra attention.

- Combine attributes of your service. If your main area of practice is auto accidents and your market is St. Louis, then combining the two gives you "St. Louis auto accidents", which would be an excellent keyword for your firm. The more specific your keywords, the better. Specific, late buying cycle keywords tend to convert at a higher rate than more broad keywords.

> *My Favorite Keyword Sources*
>
> - *Google External Keyword Tool. You can't go wrong using Google's own data as your guide. Just search Google for it.*
>
> - *SpyFu.com. You have to take these kinds of tools with a grain of salt. There is a limit to how much data they can collect. Keeping that in mind, you can learn some fascinating and valuable information about your competitors, including what keywords they are focusing on.*
>
> - *Asking. Here is something you need to keep in mind: how you describe what you do may not be the same as how someone not in your world might describe it. Try asking around how people who are not lawyers would go about searching for what you do.*

- Test keywords with paid search ads. If you take this approach, you need to be sure and have conversion tracking in place so that you know exactly what keywords generated leads. Paid search is an excellent research / data generation tool. The caveat is that, in many cases, legal-related keywords are very expensive to bid on, so you will need a decent budget to use this approach.

- Spy on your competitors. There are a couple of online services, such as spyfu.com and keywordspy.com, that allow you to see what keywords your competitors are bidding on in their paid search campaigns. This information can be very useful. But don't just assume that your competitors are smarter than you are. You will still need to test to see which of their keywords are effective.

So as you can see, there are lots of places to look for keywords.

After you use the above tools to create your initial list of keyword contenders, you should run a competitive analysis on the keywords as discussed earlier. Run an **allintitle:** Google search for each one. Then use your best judgment to choose keywords that fit into the sweet spot of having good traffic but also being in a favorable competitive situation. For example, it could be that using the word "attorney" in your home page title is just as good as using the word "lawyer" from a traffic perspective, but is less competitive. The point is to do your research to look for keywords that best match your target criteria.

Keyword Mapping

You should end up with a basket of keywords that apply to various aspects of your practice. So now you want to map those keywords to specific pages of your website for optimization. The keyword mapping process might look something like this:

Page	URL	Keywords
Home	/	Huntsville personal injury lawyer, Huntsville injury attorney
Auto Injuries	/auto-injuries/	Huntsville auto injury lawyer, Huntsville AL automobile injury attorney
Workers Compensation	/workers-compensation/	Alabama workers compensation lawyer, Huntsville workers comp attorney

One thing we often do to take this a step further is go ahead and flesh out a spreadsheet with the above data along with a keyword-optimized title, meta data and header for each page.

So now let's talk about how to optimize your web pages for your target keywords.

Contacting Virtuoso Legal Marketing LLC

If we can be of assistance, please get in touch with us.

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