



The convergence of search-engine optimization and social media

A look at how Google and the new Google+ help you leverage today's digital-marketing opportunities

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The lifeblood of a plaintiff law firm flows from its ability to foster long-standing relationships while leveraging marketing opportunities to build a stream of new clients. Internet marketing opportunities are found primarily through search engine ranking and social media marketing. This article will focus on Google and its latest tools for Web marketing.

Evolution of the Internet as marketing tool

Since the inception of the "Internet Age" in the mid 1990s, the Internet has had a revolutionary impact on how our culture creates, shares and consumes information. With a gargantuan wave of information being placed online, the need for order, organization and relevancy became the next order of business. Google seized the opportunity to become the gatekeeper of Internet search through their development of the most influential search engine in the world. This marked the beginning of the race for law firms to rank at the top of Google search for the most coveted keywords in their respective niches.

As Google's search engine algorithms – the recipe or criteria Google uses to sort through billions of Web pages and information – progressed, Internet "scientists," Web site developers, and marketers began the long quest for answers on how to push a Web site to the top of Google's search rankings. This community of people hunting for the keys to top Google ranking began to

form the basis for search-engine optimization (SEO) tactics.

In the 2000s, Google continued to hone their search-engine algorithm in order to provide the most relevant return of information and also to thwart what was then becoming a concern – the "gaming" of the search engine. The SEO community continually found ways in which to create higher rankings for Web sites. A substantial number of the Web sites that were search-engine optimized did not always provide the most relevant or up-to-date information the consumer was seeking. Google set out to revise and improve their search-engine algorithm with the goal of returning the most relevant and up-to-date information.

Google update - Panda

After many years of trying to protect the credibility of their search engine, Google decided to make monumental changes to their algorithm that would have far-reaching consequences for many law firms. The first of these updates was Panda, launched in early 2011. The goal of Panda was to lower the search rankings of Web sites that Google deemed "low-quality sites" that provided irrelevant information leading to poor user experiences. In place of these sites, Google would return higher quality Web sites that enhanced user experience through relevant up-to-date information and content.

In the past, a number of Google updates would simply affect individual pages on a Web site. In the case of the Panda update, the ranking of sections of Web sites or even the entire Web site was

affected. Subsequently, Google began their quest to improve human reader experience by providing more compelling content in their search engine results pages (SERPs).

Google update - Penguin

Roughly one year later, Google launched another algorithmic update, aimed at improving the quality of their search results, called Penguin. The goal of Penguin was to lower the rankings of Web sites that utilized "black hat" SEO tactics in order to artificially increase the number of links pointing to a particular Web site. The primary focus of Penguin, according to SearchEngineLand.com's Danny Sullivan "... is to catch people who spam its search results or purposely do things to rank better that are against Google's publishers guidelines." Most specifically, Sullivan cites the problem of "Web spam" – pages that try to gain better rankings through things like:

- Keyword stuffing
- Link schemes
- Cloaking, sneaky redirects or doorway pages
- Purposeful duplicate content

Social signals' impact

The evolution of Google's search engine is taking shape with "social signals" becoming a driving force behind improved user experience and more relevant search engine results for every search query.

In the past, the search-engine optimization community relied upon accepted link building and other SEO tactics in order to push their Web sites to the top of the Google rankings. Today



another powerful element is beginning to positively affect Google search results: social signals.

Social signals are the actions people take in response to your firm's social media updates and posts. When a reader engages with your content by re-tweeting it on Twitter, giving a +1 on Google+ or "liking" one of your Facebook updates, these actions provide a social signal that Google and other search engines are beginning to notice and take into account when ranking your Web site. Social signals provide added proof that your content is relevant to readers.

How can a law firm leverage social signals?

The focus of Google's quest to improve their search-user experience is dependent upon Web sites that produce human, reader-friendly, relevant content, accurately answer questions, provide instruction or tell stories that inform the reader. One of the most important social properties for a law firm is a blog. The blog acts as your firm's publishing platform, allowing your firm the following advantages to inspire social signals and ultimately capture leads:

- A place to tell your firm's story and chronicle ongoing news.
- A method to describe your firm's strengths and past performance.
- A vehicle that allows your firm to produce multiple pieces of content for distribution throughout your other social network accounts.
- A gathering place that provides readers a place to comment on your blog articles and receive answers to questions directly from you.

Hummingbird

Although Panda and Penguin were important updates to Google's search-ranking algorithm, the recently announced Hummingbird is a complete replacement of the old algorithm. The relevance of Hummingbird to law-firm

marketing is Hummingbird's focus on "conversational search." Rather than using the traditional search method of simply matching words in order to return results for a search, Hummingbird will instead concentrate on the meaning behind the words. According to SearchEngineLand.com's Danny Sullivan:

In particular, Google said that Hummingbird is paying more attention to each word in a query, ensuring that the whole query – the whole sentence or conversation or meaning – is taken into account, rather than particular words. The goal is that pages matching the meaning do better, rather than pages matching just a few words.

This shift and emphasis in Google search is an opportunity for law firms to begin to create meaningful content that will elicit social signals and generate new-client opportunities.

Study points to social-media activity

In an important study conducted by Searchmetrics.com, social signals were identified as the highest correlating factors with Google rankings:

Within the U.S., among 44 ranking factors examined, social signals account for seven of the eight most highly correlated with Google search results.

The following is a list of the top eight most highly correlated ranking factors with Google search in order of importance:

- Google +1
- Facebook shares
- Number of back links
- Facebook total
- Facebook comments
- Facebook likes
- Pinterest
- Tweets

Google+ a turning point in SEO

In an effort to match Facebook's

massive growth and enormous vault of social graph data, Google launched Google+. Although there is some debate as to whether Google+ is solely a social network or more accurately a platform that ties all of Google's tools, free offerings, and search engine together, there is no mistaking the Google+ effect on social signals. Launched in June 2011, Google+ has grown to 500 million registered users as of June 2013.

In other words, it is the second largest social network to Facebook. Common wisdom is that when the most influential search engine on the Internet launches a social network, it is a good idea for businesses to participate. With the growing relevance of social signals, Google+ becomes a must-have for any law firm looking for search-engine results and lead generation.

Google+ benefits to law firms

There are a number of benefits to law firms willing to establish their Google+ profile and firm page. Google+ allows users to provide their approval or recommendation of your firm's content updates by clicking the +1 button. This act of giving a +1 on a firm's update is a strong social signal and something Google considers when factoring their search engine rankings. Equally powerful is the ability for users to share your content through the Share feature. When a user clicks the Share feature on one of your content updates, your update is automatically posted to the front of their Google+ page content stream for their audience to view. Sharing of your content expands the reach of your message to new audiences you are not necessarily connected to and the possibility of a viral marketing opportunity. When a Google+ user is logged onto Google, the +1s or shares your firm's updates receive can positively influence how your content is being found during that user's search.



Local search

Google+ Local Pages are very effective in helping law firms establish their brand within search queries specific to their location. Besides the social features within Google+ pages, Local Pages have the benefit of being integrated within Google maps enabling prospective clients to find your firms' address, phone numbers, and directions.

Google+ Indexing and Page Rank

Many benefits await the law firms that create Google+ pages and profiles:

- **Indexing:** Google+ posts (updates) are crawled and indexed almost immediately.

- **PageRank:** Google Search treats Google+ profile and pages just like "regular" Web sites, meaning they have PageRank and can be just as powerful as other Web sites in terms of ranking.
- **Retain Ranking:** Google+ posts can indefinitely retain ranking which helps brands capture more real estate on search-engine results pages.

Allocating your firm's time investment

Regardless of which social media network(s) you decide to choose to support your marketing efforts, one of the most important pieces to your brand is a publishing platform. Blogs allow you to utilize the written word, video, audio files, and photo images to tell the story behind your firm's success, how you work, and why people choose your firm to represent their best interests. A law firm blog provides content that can be distributed across all social networks, thus sharing the messages that can grow your audience and increase opportunities to represent new clients.

The one common challenge for law firms that wish to leverage the power of social media is the time investment necessary to produce results. Before you can understand the most judicious way

to invest your money in social networking, you must answer three very important questions.

1. How to identify the best social network(s)

The most effective way to determine how to select the best social network(s) for your law firm is to understand your marketing goals and how each social network fits into your plans.

- **Facebook:** According to ZDNet.com in May 2013, Facebook remains the largest social network in the world with 1.11 billion active users. This gigantic audience represents opportunities for sharing content, viral marketing, and audience engagement. If your firm is willing to manage a community and engage with an ever growing audience, Facebook is a smart tool that would help increase social signal SEO.

- **Google+:** The second largest social network to Facebook, Google+ plays a vital role in garnering social signals that boost SEO for your Web site and other social properties. If your firm has plenty of content to share and a goal of increasing Google rankings, then this is an important social network to leverage.

- **Twitter:** Billed as the revolutionary real-time breaking news network on the Internet, Twitter is a powerhouse social network for distributing your law firm content and bringing in visitors to your Web site and blog. If one of your major marketing initiatives is to increase traffic to your blog, Web site, and other social properties, then Twitter is a must-have tool.

- **YouTube:** If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a video is worth even more. The second largest search engine to Google, and owned by Google, YouTube is the #1 video-sharing site on the Internet. If your firm is interested in harnessing the power of video marketing as well as increasing Web site Google ranking, YouTube is a must-have social network.

- **Pinterest:** Pinterest, is the most successful image-bookmarking site. With

70 million members, it is one of the two fastest growing social networks. The point of Pinterest is to upload your own pictures or video or those you find online and organize these images and videos into "pinboards." Users share, collect, and recommend pinboards, creating a robust viral marketing opportunity. If your firm has a vast collection of photo images and video or will begin to produce images for distribution, Pinterest is an opportunity which should not be overlooked. (See October 2013 *Plaintiff* magazine for more ideas on using Pinterest.)

2. How to staff a social media marketing program?

Whether a law firm assigns social media marketing responsibilities to internal staff or external consultants, it must consider the skills required to execute strategic social media marketing initiatives. Unlike digital and direct-mail marketing, where a technical understanding of marketing techniques, ROI measurement and spreadsheet acumen are the key skills that influence success, social-media marketers must be strong and enthusiastic conversationalists, skilled in keeping the dialog going with all types of personalities.

Technical expertise and social expertise must be considered equally important roles to maximizing the return on your firm's social media marketing investment. Firms that are unable to identify one individual who is strong in both roles should consider assigning responsibilities for the technical and social aspects to different individuals or an outsource partner.

3. In-house or outsource?

If your firm does not have the manpower or expertise to execute a successful social-media marketing program, you may want to investigate outsourcing. If you decide to work with an outside



consultant or agency, consider these vital factors:

- **Social presence:** Ask if the consultant or agency provides “live” answers and engagement while representing your firm on a social network. A scheduled automated process that simply mass broadcasts messages will not generate the social signals to fuel Google’s algorithm.
- **Behind the logo:** Require that the consultant or agency engage in communication on each one of your social network accounts as a representative of your firm. Simply put, do not allow them to reveal their identity.

- **Content:** The volume of social signals that your firm generates is determined by what you have to share from your social network(s). All content is not equal in social value. You need a strategy for developing and delivering compelling content.
- **Strategy:** A strategic plan for the social network(s) should include periodic progress reports to review the plan and make changes.

By understanding your goals and requirements, your firm can make the most informed decision on how to best take advantage of the exposure offered by social media.



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