

Search Engine Optimisation for Lawyers

Expert knowledge means success

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Note: This publication has not been updated since it was last published. Some of the hyperlinks may have changed and may need updating. In addition, some of the information in this publication may be out of date.

Introduction

All businesses need to compete for custom and a solicitor's practice is no exception. Traditionally marketing methods may have worked in the past, but increasingly prospective clients are looking to the internet to find service providers. If your practice doesn't have an easy to find, easy to use website, you could be missing out on potential business.

Registering a domain name, developing a website and choosing a reliable host are all important steps towards creating a successful marketing website. However, the process does not end there. Potential customers need to be able to find your website. If they have your website address (or Universal Resource Locator (URL)) this is straightforward. If they don't they will need to find you through a search engine database or directory listing.

Most website visitors come through the results of a search query. Your website therefore needs to feature near the top of the list of search results in order to generate the optimum visitor traffic for your website. There are two ways of achieving this: by paying for a position through a "sponsored link" or "Banner ad" or by optimising your website so that the search sites consider it a quality match for a search query.

So what is Search Engine Optimisation?

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the practice of modifying your web pages to meet the ranking criteria of the various popular search engines and directories.

A suitably optimised website may be rewarded with a high ranking, and consequently a top placement in searches. However, things are never that simple. In response to abuse of the ranking criteria, some of the more popular search engines consider additional criteria, such as the number and quality of links to a website and an editor's personal viewpoint on the quality and relevance of the content when evaluating a website's ranking.

This publication looks at the different types of search sites and offers guidance on how your practice can best optimise its website to meet the criteria of both search directories

and search engines.

Using an SEO specialist

Search engine optimisation requires ongoing monitoring of the changes to ranking criteria employed by the major search engines and directories. If your web developer does not offer this service you may need to look for an SEO specialist.

An SEO specialist should have the skills to ensure that your practice's web pages target those keywords people use when looking for solicitor related searches. The best test of a good optimiser is the placement of the sites they currently optimise. They should be able to provide you with a list of the websites they service and relevant contactable references.

Ask any potential specialist about performance reports, performance guarantees and payment and contract terms before you engage their services.

Search Sites

Search sites trawl the World Wide Web for information. Users who enter a query in a search site are presented with a list of the websites that are most likely to contain what they're looking for.

There are two main types of search site – spider search engines and directories. Directories receive submitted websites which may be manually or automatically edited. Spiders find websites by crawling through links. It is best to register your website with the major directories first to establish a link to your site and thereby improve the chances of your site being picked up by spiders. This can be time-consuming - although there are professional search engine submission firms you can pay to do it for you. Some of the search sites will present a combination of search results from search engines and directories.

Ignore adverts that offer to submit your site to thousands of search engines. Firstly, there are only a few important search engines that power multiple search services; secondly you may be offering your website address to spammers. The major search engines include Google, the Yahoo! Search Engine, Teoma



How to boost your website traffic

- First and foremost, either employ an SEO specialist or take the time to visit the popular search engines and directories and read their help guides to understand how they index and retrieve websites.
- Research and determine the keywords that users enter into search engines to find similar sites. Use a third party tool to determine the prevalence of common keywords.
- Include your keywords in all the necessary tags and in the main body of the text as described in this publication.
- Register with industry recognised directories to provide a quality link to your website, (all solicitors should be registered with The Law Society).
- Submit your website to the major search engines.
- Consider paying for high profile placement on search engines.

and Microsoft's MSN. These search engines are also used by other search sites, e.g. AOL and Lycos.

Spiders

Some search engines employ robots known as 'spiders' or 'crawlers' to explore the web on a regular basis and automatically sift through millions of web pages to find sites for inclusion in their index. Google is the best known example of this type of search engine. Since this process does not involve human editors, it is not necessary to submit your site to this type of search engine in order to be included in their index - some spiders do allow you to submit your website but this does not guarantee that your site will be listed.

The optimum way to get included in this type of search engine is to have links to your website, so that the "spiders" can find it. The more sites that link to you, the quicker your site will be found. For this reason it is often better to register your website with directories first. Once a site is listed on an index, it will be revisited at a regular interval in order to register changes or dead links.

A search engine will have many of millions of webpages in its database and must therefore use special ranking algorithms to determine appropriate search query results. One common method used is as follows: the search query is analysed, and the search engine database is then searched for the pages that contain the keywords specified in the search query. The relevant pages are then analysed in order to determine how important the keywords are on that page. The most relevant pages are listed first in the search results. The search engine allocates points to each page based on how often and where it finds the keywords on the page.

Google use its own technology to rank the importance of a page based on the number of links to (or votes for) that page combined with the importance of the page casting the vote. The more "important" a page the higher a page ranking it receives and therefore the closer it is placed to the top of the search results. Google then matches the keywords to the page content to determine which pages are relevant to the specific search being conducted. The full content of a page (and its neighbours) including its fonts, subdivisions and the precise word location is analysed.

The Teoma search engine (as used by ASK) uses a "Subject Specific Popularity" system to power its searches. This clusters information into communities. It identifies which sites are authorities in particular subjects and then ranks the search results based upon the frequency of mentions with those authorities. This gives more accurate search results as the results are based upon the relationship between topical links rather than just link quantity.

Directories

Directories employ editors to assess each individual submission. Yahoo and DMOZ (Netscape's Open Directory Project - which also supplies the Google Web Directory) are the best known examples of this type of search engine and allow you to submit your website free of charge. They may also have chargeable options - for example Yahoo Directory Submit - to allow your site to be considered quickly. Some directories only accept paid advertisements.

When submitting your website to a directory you may need to write a short description of your website which includes some of the key words used on it. Your description and the website should be well written and professional in order to convince the directory editor that you have a professional, useful and informative site. It is particularly important to get a listing in Yahoo and the Open Directory project as these are regarded as quality links by spider search engines.

The directory editor will decide whether your site is good enough for inclusion. They may write the titles and descriptions and decide on a category for your site. Alternatively, you may be asked to write this information yourself for consideration when submitting the site.

Web Directories for Solicitors

Check out the following industry websites to see if your website could benefit from inclusion in their directory:

www.directory.co.uk/solicitors.htm
www.lawontheweb.co.uk
www.lawsociety.org.uk
www.lawsociety.org.uk
www.lawyerlocator.co.uk
<http://legal-directory.net>
www.solicitors.co.uk

Optimising your website for a spider

A search engine reads the code on the webpage - not the page that you see on the website. If a package is used to automatically create the webpage code it may therefore be necessary to amend the code to optimise it for a search engine. For example, the HTML code produced for a webpage by a well known Word Processing package includes non-standard tags. These would need to be changed to optimise the code for search engines.

Keyword phrases

The most important part of search engine optimization is selecting the right keywords for your business. It is very difficult to compete for the search results for a single word search query and you may not necessarily want to. Niche words may drive more targeted traffic to your site than generalist terms. For example, if you own a hotel in a Switzerland ski resort, you want to be found by people searching for “alpine ski resorts” or “hotel ski Switzerland” not by all web visitors that simply enter the word “hotel”. All of the relevant keywords must be on a webpage for it to stand a chance of appearing at the top of the rankings.

Researching the potential of keywords is crucial to ranking success. Create a list of relevant keyword phrases and ask other contacts what keywords they would use to look for your offering. You could also use a thesaurus to find synonyms for your chosen words. Consider what users looking for a business like yours are likely to enter in a search engine and whether there is anything unique about your offering. Don't forget to include your area of service as a keyword.

There are online keyword services where you can see how popular your keywords are and get ideas for other relevant keywords. For example, see www.wordtracker.com.

When you have determined your keywords, optimise their placement on your home page (your index.html) as this is the most important page to a search engine. Optimise your linked pages according to the keyword relevant to those pages. As a guide, do not try to optimise the page for more than three keyword phrases or you may reduce their impact. Bear in mind that many search engines ignore common words such as on, and, it etc.

How to use keywords to improve your ranking

Most search engines use keywords as part of their searching and ranking algorithm. They are also used to display a description of your site. Choosing the right keywords and placing them in the appropriate section of your webpage is therefore vital for ranking success. Follow these tips:

Research your keywords

- Identify the most frequent keywords or keyword phrases used by your target audience and create a webpage page based on each keyword or keyword phrase.
- **Don't be frightened of niche words or phrases;** this could produce less competing pages.

Repeat your keywords

- The more times a keyword or keyword phrase appears within a webpage, the better your chance of the page being found.
- Make various keyword phrases using the same main keyword with other qualifying keywords. E.g. alpine holiday, Austrian holiday, winter holiday.
- **Don't forget to use plurals too!**
- **Don't just repeat the keyword multiple times** as this may disqualify your website.

Keyword density

- Keyword density is the ratio of keywords against the number of words within a Web page. Aim for a density of around 5%.

Place your keywords with care

- Your main keywords must be included in the <title> tag, <headline> tag, <meta> tag and at the beginning of the body, preferably in the first sentence.

Keywords in domain names

- Domain names are also checked during searches, so if you can, include your main keywords in your domain name (preferably with and without hyphens), you will have a far greater chance of being seen.

For example if your practice name is Smith, consider:
www.smith-solicitors.com or
www.smith-solicitors-london.com rather than just www.smith.com.

Optimised HTML code

Search engine ranking algorithms are secret and subject to change so it is a challenge to produce an ideally optimised webpage. There are many theories on optimising HTML code, however it is commonly recognised that the use of different types of tags, the content of the page and the placing of keywords within it have the most significance.

The <title> tag

The <title> tag is arguably the most important element of a webpage and must include your most significant keywords. It is displayed in the top windows-bar of the user's web browser window. It needs to be a sensible informative inviting phrase as it may be displayed in a search engine's results listing. If applicable, include the geographical area you cover as search queries often specify an area.

The <meta> tags

Meta tags are written specifically to describe your page to search engines: they are not visible in a browser window. They are placed after the <title> tag, but before the <body> tag. Not all search engines look at meta tags, but while some still do, it is important to include them. Only three need to be used:

```
<META NAME="KEYWORDS"  
CONTENT=" a list of your keywords" >
```

The keywords can be separated by commas, but if you separate them by spaces you will get a greater combination of keywords. Try not to repeat keywords: if you need to – because they are part of a keyword phrase – keep the occurrences apart. Only include keywords that are relevant to your page and ideally are included in the visible text on your page. Otherwise, the keywords could be interpreted as spam. Mis-spellings and plurals are acceptable.

```
<META NAME="DESCRIPTION"  
CONTENT=" a description of your site" >
```

Some search engines use the description entered into the CONTENT field for the description given in the search result listings. Again, it should be a sensible informative inviting sentence that includes the main keywords. The most important part of the description should be first as the maximum search engine display listing is 250 characters and is often less.

```
<META NAME="ROBOTS"  
CONTENT="ALL" >
```

The CONTENT field of the ROBOTS meta tag can have various settings. If it is set to ALL, this tells the search engine to index the page.

```
<META NAME="ROBOTS"  
CONTENT="NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW" >
```

If it is set as above, this tells the search engine to neither index the document, nor analyze it for links.

```
<META NAME="ROBOTS"  
CONTENT="NOINDEX, FOLLOW" >
```

If it is set as above, this tells the search engine not to index the document, but to index the pages it is pointing to.

<body> text

Each page should have at least 250 words of informative text that includes the selected keywords several times without obvious unnatural repetition. Make sure you include the keyword phrase in the first paragraph of text; ideally in the first sentence.

The optimal keyword density varies between search engines but has been estimated at between 2 and 5 percent. This is the relationship between the total number of words on a page and how many times the keyword phrase is included.

Headline Tags

Include your keyword phrase in the first top-level headline tag (e.g. <h1>).

Other optimisation issues

Text placement

Search engines want to find text, not graphics or tables. When you are designing a page, give some thought to where you place such items so as to help the search engines find your text. Ideally, include your keywords in normal text at the very top of the page. If you cannot do that, keep the number of images and other non-textual elements before the main body text to a minimum.

Frames

Some search engines have difficulties reading webpages that use frames (where different pages can be loaded into different sections of the browser window) and will only list the frameset page, without the content pages.

If you want to use frames, you can get around this problem by listing your keywords in the <NOFRAMES> tag in the frameset file. This tag allows you to incorporate a separate webpage that can be read by browsers and search engines that are unable to interpret frames. Search engines that are not spidering the framed pages will normally read this text.

Where a search engine can find framed content pages on a frame-based website it will normally ignore the frameset page and therefore the <NOFRAMES> tag. Each one of the framed pages must therefore be optimised. However, be aware that the search engines will present a link to the framed pages, not to the frameset itself, which means that you will need to ensure that there is a suitable navigation path on the framed page, or that some JavaScript is included to automatically load the complete frameset.

Directory Structure

Where possible, always site your webpages at the top directory level. A search engine will find *www.asite.com/index.html* easier than *www.asite.com/level1/level2/level3/index.html*.

Page links

You can submit all of your site's webpages to a search engine but they prefer to find them by themselves. You therefore need to ensure that they can find them! You should include links to as many of your webpages as possible from all of your webpages. This will ensure that a search engine will find as much of your site as possible, wherever it enters your website. If you have a large website you could include a site map that includes all the sections of your site with descriptions and links to most pages.

Search engines like links embedded in normal text. They cannot follow links embedded into Flash or into image maps. If you do use these features make sure you include regular links as well.

Spamming

Don't try to fool the search engines. They are wise to the various spamming techniques and may penalise or ban your site if they believe you are artificially trying to boost your ranking. Avoid the following:

- Incorporating links into 1x1 pixel images that link to hidden pages;
- Including keywords in very small text, e.g. (FONT SIZE="1");
- Artificial repetition of a keyword;
- Including keywords in the same colour as the webpage background. N.B. If your table text colour is the same colour as the background colour of the page, this may be mistaken for spam!

Script generation

Some search engines have difficulty with dynamic database or script generated pages with URLs that include the "&" and "?" signs generated by Perl CGI scripts as they can cause a spider to loop endlessly generating thousands of pages. Pages that include these signs should be individually submitted.

External links

Some of the most popular search engines, e.g. Google and Teoma place considerable value on the quantity of links to your site from quality sites when determining page ranking.

How to use hyperlinks to improve your ranking

Keywords are not enough! Hyperlinks (links) also play an important role in page ranking. Google ranks the importance of a page based on the number of links to that page combined with the importance of the page containing the link. Similarly, the Teoma search engine (ASK, Lycos) identifies which sites are authorities in particular subjects and then ranks the search results based upon the frequency of mentions with those authorities.

Industry bodies/associations

- Industry associations are likely to be regarded as quality authorities in their subjects. If by joining them, your website will be listed on theirs, do so! All solicitors should be registered with The Law Society.

Other businesses

- If appropriate ask customers, suppliers, business partners to provide a link to your website, either for a small fee (if required), or as part of a reciprocal arrangement.

Crosslinks

You must link from your home/index webpage to all other webpages in your website if you want them all to be listed in a search index. If you have more than one website, make sure they link to each other, and use keywords in the link text.

Avoid unknown link exchanges/farms that offer high web traffic. Most search engines consider these tactics as spam and may block your site!

Optimising your website for a directory

You need to employ different tactics when optimising your website for a directory. Obviously, you still need to include all the tags and keywords required when optimising for a spider search engine, as ultimately you want to get your site listed in both spiders and directories. However, with a directory you are dealing with a human being and you will need to be professional, accurate and courteous in your submission and comply with any stated conditions. The editor is looking for high quality content-rich websites for his "customers" and will want to see a visually appealing and informative site; not just one that has been littered with keywords in the hope that it will be picked up by the spiders. He will be looking for sites with original content. In commercial sites this is often not possible, so distinguish your site by including articles or other relevant information.

If you pay for your submission, an editor must visit and consider your site but this does not guarantee its inclusion. The following points should be addressed before submitting your site to a directory editor:

- Include a statement on the home page that clearly indicates the purpose of the website.
- Check that your site does not contain any content, products, services or other information that may be offensive or illegal to sell or which might infringe copyright laws.
- Check that your website is suitable for viewing by multiple browser types and versions, including MACs. (If you use JavaScript stick to features that are supported by all browsers and platforms)
- Ensure that all links resolve correctly.
- There should be no missing images or "under construction" messages.
- If you use a lot of images or animation, you need to ensure they are optimised for fast download.
- Your site must be well structured with clear navigation.
- Graphics should look professional: use JPEG or PNG files for photographs and GIF files for logos and banners. Use only the Websafe 216 colour palette for GIF files and use antialiasing on lettering. Avoid cartoons and graphics with background noise.

- The quality of your code may be checked by an automatic HTML code checker, so make sure there is no redundant or inefficient coding.
- Where possible, avoid Java, Shockwave, Flash and other technologies that may require special plug-ins to operate. If you do use specialist technologies ensure that your website is still operational where these technologies are not supported.
- Keep your webpage design simple and avoid overfilling the space or including too many different colours or different fonts.
- Avoid horizontal scrolling; aim for windows no more than 600 pixels wide to allow the whole page to be visible on a 640*480 pixel MAC screen.
- Don't have too many advertising banners that may detract from your site's content and impact.
- Choose a reliable hoster, as directories will expect your site to be available 24*7.
- Avoid unnecessary replication of keywords, or techniques that may indicate you are trying to spam the search engines.
- If you are asked to select a category with your submission, ensure that it matches your business area.
- If you are a commercial site, include relevant sales and returns policies. If you accept payment, include any secure payment information or logos.

Reciprocal links

Part of a spider's analysis of your website is based on the number of links pointing to it. Exchanging links with other businesses is a good way of helping to get your site into a search engine's index and improving your position in their listings.

A free way of increasing the number of visitors ("traffic") to your website is by exchanging reciprocal links with other businesses whereby you put a link to a business on your website in exchange for a link to your business being placed on their website.

There are various small business directories that offer a reciprocal link service. However, some of the search engines have started punishing sites that have "link-farm" pages, so take care when selecting a reciprocal link service. A better alternative may be to try to exchange links with other local businesses or your suppliers.

If you work with complementary businesses, it may be worth seeing if you can set up reciprocal partner pages.

If you put reciprocal links on your home page, visitors could be tempted away before reading about your business. You may therefore want to consider placing them on a secondary page or having a dedicated page for links.

Search engine advertising

Most search engines offer advertising opportunities. Online advertisements (or Banner ads) are just another way of marketing your business and driving customers to your site and can be an effective way of getting targeted traffic to your website. Banner ads will typically be placed on sites that are in some way linked to your product or service. Visitors who click on them will be taken through to your site. Be wary of signing-up for “Pop-up Ads” as these can be annoying – particularly if they obscure a website - and therefore defeat their purpose. Also some potential customers may block pop-up ads.

Advertising through search engines can be very cost effective. They allow your business to be marketed to web visitors at a time when they are looking for the products or services that you offer. The ad’s cost can be linked to its exposure up to a maximum limit.

You can create simple Banner ads yourself, although you may prefer to use a designer. Some of the search engines will have a standard format that must be followed, particularly where the advertisement has to fit into a specific area – typically at the top of a search listing (as a sponsored link) or in boxes down the side of the search results. You can read guidelines on the size and shape of Banner ads at the Interactive Advertising Bureau UK website: www.iabuk.net.

Banner ads must comply with Advertising Standards Authority rules which state they must be legal, decent, honest and truthful. Read about online advertising in general at the Advertising Standards Authority website: www.asa.org.uk.

There are typically two pricing models for Banner ads.

Cost-per-Click

With this model, you pay only for clicks on your Banner ads that go through to your website. You should be able to control your expenditure by setting financial limits per day and per click. With some search engines, businesses may bid against each other for key words related to their product or service. The amount you agree to pay for each click determines how high up the list of ads yours will appear. The advantages of this model are that you only pay for visitors to your site, your site will be listed immediately and you can use it to take advertise seasonal or time-limited offers.

Cost-per-Impression

With this model, you pay a set cost based on the number of times your advertisement is displayed to web users.

Site submission

Your website needs to be indexed by a directory or search engine in order to be found by internet browsers.

Directory submission

You should always submit your web site to the generic web directories before submitting to the search engines as this will provide quality links to your site that can be found by a search engine spider.

If you are submitting your site to a generic web directory, you will need to select the most appropriate categories and in some cases write a title and description that will be your listing in the directory and influence the success of your listings in search engines.

Don’t forget to submit your site to any industry directories too!

Each web directory has its own submission policies; a good reason for opting for manual submission. For example;

- Yahoo offers free submission for non-commercial websites (with no guarantee when your site will be reviewed or listed; and a Directory Submit submission for £199 for all web sites that guarantees a site review within 7 business days but does not guarantee inclusion of your site in the directory. It only guarantees that Yahoo! will review your site within 7 business days.

- The Open Directory Project or DMOZ (used by major search engines including Google) allows free submissions.
- LookSmart (used by Lycos) only offers submissions to commercial web sites, and charges on a cost-per-click basis.

Search engine submission

If you have structured your webpage so that it can be found, and it has links to it, it will be automatically detected during a routine “crawl” by the spiders of the main search engines, although this may take some time. You may therefore prefer to manually submit your site which may speed up the process.

If you have no links to your site, you **must** manually submit (and regularly resubmit) your site, as it will not be found by the crawlers. If you have no business links to your site, register with directories before submitting your site to a search engine as this will create a link to your site.

Bear in mind that submission is no guarantee of inclusion and that all of your webpages must be able to be found by a crawler to be indexed.

There are professional search engine submission firms who will submit your site to directories and search engines for a fee. There are also software programs and online tools that allow you to submit your own webpages automatically to search engines. If you decide to use one of these tools or services, be aware that search engines regard excessive submissions as spam and may ban your website. The best course of action may be to submit your site to the major search engine and directories by hand.

Do not be tempted to continually resubmit your site. A search engine may regard this as spamming and reduce your ranking. You may wish to resubmit the site if you have made substantial changes to it, but it is not necessary: the search engine will discover the changes when it next crawls your site.

There are also ranking software packages available that can search the various search engines for you, and produce easy to read reports on search engine positions and trends.

Information on popular search engine submission and ranking software can be found at:

www.searchenginecommando.com
www.webposition.com
www.softwarekey.com/products

Recommended Reading

Search Engine Advertising: Buying Your Way to the Top to Increase Sales

by Catherine Seta published March 2004
ISBN: 0735713995

Building Your Business with Google for Dummies

by Brad Hill published July 2004
ISBN: 0764571435

Search Engine Optimisation for Dummies

by P Kent published May 2004
ISBN: 0764567586

Marketing Through Search Optimization: How to Be Found on the Web

by Alex Michael and Ben Salter published May 2004
ISBN: 0750659793



Popular Search Engine Websites

Visit the following search engines and directories to find out more about their submission services and indexing techniques:

www.altavista.com
www.aol.com
www.ask.com
www.dmoz.org
www.google.com
http://search.looksmart.com
www.lycos.com
www.msn.com
www.teoma.com
www.yahoo.com
www.bing.com

Further Information

This guide is for general interest - it is always essential to take advice on specific issues.

We believe that the facts are correct as at the date of publication, but there may be certain errors and omissions for which we cannot be responsible.

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