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The Alphabet Soup of Online Marketing

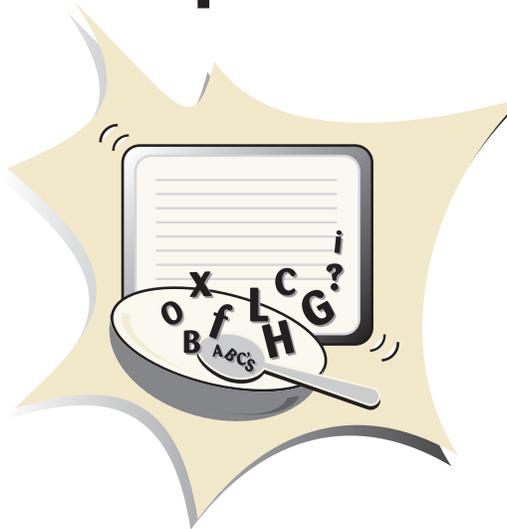
By Sharon Berman

An integral part of today's marketing umbrella is your online marketing strategy – web sites, SEO, blogs, podcasts, RSS, CGI forms, and the rest of the alphabet soup of tactics that are at your disposal.

As marketing champions, law firm administrators are often involved in the push to revise and update the firm's website, or to explore ways to expand marketing online. Although you may navigate the online marketing seas, you may not be familiar with some of the key terms and acronyms. Here then are the basics.

A much-discussed area is that of "search engine optimization" (SEO). Plainly put, SEO is part art and part science of getting your firm's website to come up at the top of the results list when someone performs a search on a term related to your firm (e.g., employment law; workers compensation; etc.). Human nature is to read a page starting from the top, so being among the very first search results will increase in the number of eyes looking at your site.

There are two kinds of search results: "Organic" (or natural) and "Sponsored search." An organic search is a listing of results which have not been paid for. These results come up "naturally" for a variety of reasons, such as having a substantial amount of text on your website that is relevant to the search term. Another way to rise in the search results is to be linked to by many other websites (Google calls this "Page Ranking"). Sponsored search results are those for which firms have paid for their listings to be shown first, and the search engine receives revenue anytime someone "clicks-through" to visit the sponsoring site. Sponsored search results aren't based on website content; rather, they are based on keywords selected by the



sponsor (i.e., "Drunk Driving"; "DUI"; "DMV suspension"; etc.). Sponsors tell the search engines how much they're willing to pay for each click-through, so the sponsors willing to pay more per-click are listed above those willing to pay less.

Sponsored results are labeled as such. Next time you do a search on Google, notice the group of results labeled as "Sponsored Links" at the top and side of the page. Interestingly, surveys have shown that a large number of people don't realize there is a difference between organic and sponsored results.

Getting your page to show up at the top of the sponsored links section is easy. Google will tell you how much it will cost-per-click to be listed at or near the top. If you're willing to pay-to-play, then you can budget accordingly.

Content + SEO = \$

But how do you get your site to come up with a high ranking for organic searches? The foundation is to write the best copy you can, naturally and repeatedly incorporating the key words your prospects use in a search (e.g., "estate planning" or

"auto accident"). Although you definitely want to incorporate those words, you don't want your copy to sound forced.

Other elements to consider when designing your site to rise in the organic listings are your page titles, headlines and "reciprocal linking" (who links to your site and to whom your site is linked). "Meta-tags" that provide information about your site to the search engines is an often underutilized tool to increase your site's organic value. Also, providing a "sitemap.xml" file to Google and Yahoo showing all of your site's pages will dramatically increase the pages listed on the search engines, and raise your organic ratings at the same time.

In many practice areas competition for top organic rankings is fierce, and SEO is not something that you can do once and be done with. Rather, it requires routine assessments and adjustments. Also, be aware that it can take weeks before the search engines recognize changes to your site in the rankings. Because SEO is its own field of marketing, there are specialty companies to fill the niche. Web sites of firms that regularly come up near the top in a search often have an SEO company on retainer that is constantly tweaking the site contents and technical data behind the scenes. If you are interested in learning more about the details of SEO, check out the website www.highrankings.com and



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Alphabet Soup (Cont.)

sign up for the newsletter. Jill Whalen has been guiding firms with their SEO for over a decade and she writes in a very accessible way.

“I Write, Therefore I Blog”

Moving on, another term you hear a lot is “blog,” a melding of the words “web” and “log.” Maybe your firm or some key persons within the firm have already started one. Those who write blogs are called “bloggers” and some blogs (and bloggers) have become very influential within their fields. Typically, a blog is a website that is presented in the form of an online journal or diary. The blogger writes about whatever he or she wants. There can be a theme, such as information and comments related to, say, “renewable energy,” or the blog might be about what the blogger’s day was like. The most effective and visited blogs are frequently updated with the most recent postings at the top, so the reader knows what’s newest.

Blogs are often set up so that visitors can comment on the blogger’s content. In other cases it’s a one-way street in which a blogger talks to the visitors, or even to himself or herself while site visitors look on.

If your firm or one of your lawyers is considering starting a blog, make sure they understand the commitment to keep it fresh. Visiting a blog whose last post is

months old says a lot more about a firm than not having a blog.

“Rotate the Pod, please, Hal...”

A “podcast” is a method of publishing audio and sometimes video files to the Internet. Think of a podcast as a spoken blog.

Today, the term podcast refers to almost anything that is intended to be played back on a digital media player. The person who creates the material for a podcast is called a “Podcaster.” There are free programs for all of the popular operating systems to produce podcasts with nothing more than a \$15.00 computer microphone, so anyone can do it. You do not need to have an iPod® to listen to a podcast. Virtually any computer that connects to the Internet can find and play podcasts.

Those who are interested in a particular podcast can subscribe to a podcast feed. This will ensure that each time the podcaster releases a new podcast, that program will automatically downloaded to the podcast subscriber’s computer.

How can you make use of a podcast in your firm? Say, for example, that you have been sending out a newsletter covering real estate law. A podcast gives you the ability to expand on it. For instance, your real estate attorney can now create an audio version commenting on the material and its

impact, and your clients can subscribe to the podcast. In this way they have the option of listening to it in their car or whenever they want.

Keeping it Really Simple

Websites also offer a way to let visitors know about new content without having to visit the site. This method of pushing new site content to subscribers uses an RSS feed. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication, which is a common protocol for letting web browsers know that a constantly updated site listing is available. The presence of an RSS feed is indicated by a small orange icon in the browser address bar, or somewhere on a site, typically at the bottom of the page.

Technology <> Marketing

Technology may open new vistas in your firm’s marketing plans, but it hasn’t changed one immutable fact. Just like any marketing tactic, you have the option to take advantage of it, or not. You have the option to do it well, or not.

Ultimately, what distinguishes your firm from others are the strengths and points of differentiation you’ve worked so hard to achieve. It’s how well you tell the story of your strengths and points of differentiation to your potential and existing clients that brings them to your doorstep, and keep them coming back.