



FIND THE **MAGICAL MIX** FOR YOUR **DIGITAL MARKETING PLAN**

Grounded by your goals, make choices that showcase your strengths and incorporate traditional and online exposure

By MICAH BUCHDAHL

There has never been a more competitive time to be a family law practitioner.

Between the continued growth of digital marketing and technology, consolidation of law firms, changes in multi-jurisdictional boundaries, and pressures from nonlawyer enterprises selling legal services, the family law attorney can no longer remain viable simply by relying on word-of-mouth marketing and referrals.

While most attorneys have come to grips with the need to devote time, money, and resources to marketing and business development, the key questions for each of

those elements is which ones, how much, and why? There are no cut-and-dried answers. Do not listen to those who tell you there is a set formula of time and money per lawyer or law firm. The variables are significant. Depending on your strategic business plan, geography, firm, and practice areas, the range is wide open. But there are many tools, products, and routes from which to choose.

As an attorney and business developer, I've always enjoyed marketing a family law practice.

It really has its own sweet spot. In most cases, it does not carry the competitive advertising pressures of many plaintiffs' firms. It also does not fit within the marketplace for many multi-practice, midsize, and large law firms.

Regardless of your firm's fiscal and physical standing, there are literally dozens of avenues you can take to better market yourself amid thriving consumer demand that shows no signs of slowing.

It is easy to become overwhelmed by the variety of digital marketing opportunities out there. Unless your practice is supported by a multi-person marketing team with significant resources, it is virtually impossible to try them all. In many ways, this underscores the importance of a proper game plan. All of these options have worked for some family law firms. They may or may not fit your needs. Your goal should be to try those you think will work for you. And depending on how you manage your practice, people, and growth—slowly build a business development effort to match your objectives.

■ YOUR GAME PLAN

At the core of a successful marketing effort is a game plan. Setting goals, deliverables, and a budget goes a long way toward an effective use of your time and money. Among the biggest mistakes attorneys make are (1) to try 100 things at once, instead of doing 10 things well; (2) to spend money without tracking the ROI (return on investment); and (3) to stray from "the plan."

Begin by putting your marketing plan in writing and include short, mid-, and long-term goals for your business. Analyze what you've done in the past to be successful and where you are hoping to go. Your marketing budget needs to realistically support those plans. Marketing without a plan means you'll likely end up with a scattershot approach that leaves you feeling frustrated and dissatisfied with the results.

The good news is that your options are infinite. The bad news is that you can't pursue every marketing idea that pops into your head. Look at the full range of options and choose the marketing ideas and approaches that you believe can be effective, given your practice and personality.

■ THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Although it goes without saying that "digital" is where most marketing resources should be focused today,

family law marketers continue to utilize all forms of media to reach a primarily consumer audience. Depending on budget and geography, no traditional media forms are out of bounds here. For example, take a look at lifestyle-oriented publications. Often divorce-law-related ads outnumber even personal injury ads. When used in the right manner (good branding, messaging, placement, and frequency), all approaches can be effective—billboards, radio, television, print. Likewise, family law topics are ripe for consumer seminars and community programs.

Combined with other efforts, good media and public relations can still go a long way in marketing your practice. You also will need to reinforce your efforts with good online credentials. But regardless of whether you are sending a self-serving press release to the neighborhood weekly or trying to be the "voice" of family law in your community—and the subject of interviews by print or television journalists—good media coverage can generate clients and also provide a "third party" reference: your words or writings may be quoted online on a website, blog, or in your advertisements.

Marketing is not a replacement for the core principles that underlie most successful business development. Obviously, you are reading this article

so you are aware of the importance of marketing: already involved in the American Bar Association and probably a state and/or local bar. You are attuned to the natural day-to-day networking opportunities available in your community, with colleagues, and in other aspects of your life. You've referred nonfamily law matters to other lawyers who, in turn, do the same for you. And the old adage of "doing good work is my marketing" never goes out of style. Remember too, my follow-up adage is equally true, "good marketing tells people about the good work that you do."

Your options are endless. You've likely tried some of these. Let the following list be your Chinese menu of options for your next marketing moves.

The website: If you require a primer on why you need a website, this article is not going to help you much. That conversation should have concluded more than a decade ago. Most firms are on website #3 or more. Depending on your goals—to develop an online listing of your accomplishments or to locate potential new clients (usually a combination of the two)—you'll put more of your marketing budget and effort into your website design and content or search engine optimization than anywhere else. The core concept for the website, whether it describes your solo office,

your boutique firm, or your niche service within a larger multi-practice firm, is to make sure that the site serves as an online repository of your portfolio—every media quote, article, accolade, combined with credible descriptions of what you can do for each new client—in terms of mediation, negotiating child custody or support, etc.

Blogs: There are more than seven million blogs on the Web, so we're not exactly talking about breaking new ground here. It is increasingly difficult in a crowded blogosphere to stand out. However, the freshness of content and the ability to tie your blog "perspective" to the firm's website are beneficial. A blog is yet another way to get "found" on the Internet. The format provides an editorial approach that may lead interested media your way and can increase search engine results in family law categories.

The keys to blogging: First, the blog must be content-rich and constantly updated (whether you do it yourself or hire a "ghost" blogger to assist); second, the theme should not be general "divorce," but have a targeted focus; and third, you need to take advantage of tools such as RSS feeds to maximize your efforts. For some good examples, see www.sandiegodivorceattorneyblog.com and www.fortlauderdaledivorcelawyerblog.com, which are both strong blogs linked to websites and social media. Also, see the use of components, such as video, at the blog of DC divorce lawyer Regina DeMeo, who blogs at genxsmartie.blogspot.com.

Video: The expanded use of video plays multiple roles in further developing your practice, from making a TV commercial accessible online to developing family law FAQs to post on YouTube, your website, or a blog. For search engine purposes, "video" has its own tagging that can enhance search results. Though creating a professional-looking video is far less expensive today than in the past, there

is nothing uglier than amateur hour.

TheLaw.TV is now in many major metropolitan markets. It combines multiple elements of online marketing and video, targeting the consumer through television, websites, video channels, and search engine optimization—focusing on delivering legal information. Part directory, part frequently asked questions, it is a venture that provides an example of the next-generation offerings for consumer-oriented law practices outside of standard directories, pay-per-click campaigns, and blogs. A look at attorney Howard Lotven's practice in Kansas City, Missouri (<http://the-law.tv/kansas/Divorce+Law>), shows how all the online elements tie into the use of video.

Search Engine Optimization

(SEO): Although what shows up when a prospective client types your name into a search engine (based on a referral, recommendation, your business card, or an ad) is one selling tool, SEO is designed to move you to the top of search results so that prospective clients who do not have a reference to work from will find you. SEO is what the Yellow Pages once were—and it is costly, competitive, and sophisticated. And when you add the related PPC (pay per click) campaigns through sites like Google, the investment can run into six figures annually.

Mobile sites: In recent years, the website accessibility conversation has moved from formatting properly for the right browsers to developing sites ready for smart phones, PDAs, and iPads. Today, it is less and less likely that a client or prospect will access your marketing data on a desktop or laptop. It is critical that—at a minimum—your firm overview, biography, and contact information are easy to read and to access on a smart phone.

■ SOCIAL MEDIA

Let's face it, Facebook has been a huge business generator in the world of

divorce. Whether it is an accelerator for family law-related problems is a subject for another publication, but there is no question that Facebook is having a significant impact on the practice of family law. Social media is a major player in discovery proceedings, but it also is a serious component of a marketing plan.

Steven Blumenthal's family law website (www.sblumenthallaw.com) features no fewer than five social media icons on its home page—Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Justia, and Google+. Luckily, products such as HootSuite and TweetDeck make upkeep of social media posts a bit easier. However, such maintenance can be overwhelming to many. These products provide a great additional "feed" for your blog posts, firm news, articles, and events. They also serve to build additional networks of people and contacts that may generate new and additional business.

Although Facebook is not a major online marketing tool for most law practices, family law is the exception. As a family law attorney on Facebook, you are able to softly pitch your services to personal/social contacts when the inevitable family law issue surfaces among friends and neighbors. People go to Facebook when they are happy ("Here is the family at Disney World!") and sad ("Life blows."). The "sad" might seek legal help on a sensitive subject online, rather than in a face-to-face social setting. You won't write on any walls, "Call me if you need a good divorce lawyer," but reminding your social network of what you do for a living will put you in their minds when difficult times come.

LinkedIn is valuable for providing a business contact with some "personal" advice. In much the same way that many family law practices get a huge chunk of work from clients who first encountered the firm in a business law or bankruptcy matter, LinkedIn can be a good source of lawyer-to-lawyer referrals. Most marketers separate

Selling a niche

The first time I heard of the law firm of Cordell & Cordell, I was in my car listening to sports radio during a morning drive. I was struck by the message—so much so that I’ve always remembered the firm name (although I hope never to be a client). They are all about “divorce for men” and market to that specific niche.

Many family law firms tout the opposite of Cordell—women lawyers helping women clients. But whether it is recommending alternative dispute resolution, problem-solving for a specific type of client, or a particular expertise, the ability to focus a message to a targeted potential client base in a way that does not sound like all the other “sell” messages on the Web is an art form—and can be quite lucrative. When I look at a few consumer magazines in my geographic market, outside of restaurants, divorce law ads dominate. And in most cases, they blend like oil paints on canvas, with little differentiation. They generate calls, but not because of unique messaging.

Facebook from LinkedIn by referencing one as personal/social and the other as pure business networking. In family law, they are both relevant.

The 140-character limit on Twitter provides plenty of time to ask... Does anybody have a recommendation for a good divorce lawyer? And a few of those searches will demonstrate that this example is real, not hypothetical. Marketers are looking for those tweets to send people in your direction. For those who tweet faithfully, you can bet that this conversational tool will be the one used to search for counsel.

Social media can be overwhelming, but it can also be lucrative. And while time is money, the out-of-pocket cost is next to nothing. There are attorneys who put the bulk of their marketing elbow grease into a few of these sites.

■ DIRECTORIES

The world was so much simpler when your primary marketing choice was Martindale-Hubbell and/or the Yellow Pages. However, the general (and mostly accurate) assumption is that print or hard copy is obsolete. These days, almost every directory is Internet-based, and for most of them the selling point involves some tie to SEO. Probably the best no-cost lawyer directory is housed on Justia. Not only is the listing lengthy and free, but it has a database feeding multiple lawyer directories. Many

sites in your community will offer free or inexpensive lawyer listings. Also make sure to take advantage of local listings for Google and Yahoo.

For some practices, the Yellow Pages still brings in more money than it costs. In many cases, the value of Martindale is driven by particular audiences and often geographic locations. The Yellow Pages and Martindale are far from what they once were and may or may not remain relevant for your particular practice.

■ THE RATINGS GAME

Many sites combine elements of “directory” with a variety of reviews, rankings, and ratings. The ratings game—from Avvo to Chambers USA to SuperLawyers to Best Lawyers, and on and on and on—usually comes with directory-like opportunities (like ads, plaques, press releases, sponsorships, and so on). Because most family law practices market to the general public, showing the occasional accolade does not hurt. If you want to be “award winning” and you are not, it is probably not because you are a mediocre lawyer—but because you have not taken advantage of these online ratings resources.

Beyond rankings and ratings are reviews. Family law is ripe for client “reviews”—for good and evil. The strength of sites such as City Search and Yelp are great when the com-

A visit to their website shows excellent integration of content, video, PR, SEO, and client intake techniques. In a crowded market, finding a differentiator is a huge plus. Although from time to time some may question the “tastefulness” of an approach, strong law firm advertising comes with a touch of risk.

ments are glowing, but not so much when a disgruntled client or opponent rants on and on about your bad results and incompetence. Unlike many marketing ventures, you can’t dictate participation. If I have a bad experience with you and choose to tell the world on Yelp, there is little recourse. This goes back to your online portfolio and knowing what a Google search says about you.

■ MOVING FORWARD

Every new day offers another entrepreneurial effort that might be worth a try. If you didn’t know that Groupon offers legal services for divorce (in most jurisdictions, though ethics opinions vary), you should. Like most successful marketing, someone is generating new business by trying something different. Being tactical and adventurous, while still maintaining your professionalism, can lead to lots of new clients, practices, and opportunities. **FA**



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