

Creating an Effective Plaintiffs Website

THE RADIUS OF INFLUENCE APPROACH

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Since firms started marketing online, most have focused primarily on maximizing the number of visitors to their site and converting as much of that traffic into leads as possible. The assumption is that more traffic and higher conversion rates lead directly to more cases and more success. This isn't necessarily accurate.

The key to building an effective web presence -- one that grows your practice and leads to long term success -- is first to understand who is actually visiting your site. Generally visitors can be broken down into two categories, *qualified* visitors and *unqualified* visitors. Qualified visitors are those who are specifically looking for you or your firm, usually by name. Unqualified visitors are those who are looking for, well, almost anything else.

Most firms, web developers and search engine experts focus on attracting as much traffic as possible which means they end up with mostly "unqualified" traffic. Firms may find a very small number of potential clients that have no other knowledge of their brand, but most visitors attracted through these techniques have no need for an attorney, no interest in hiring an attorney, or have been declined at other firms but are still shopping their case. Higher traffic may make your website seem more effective but often actually represents a drain on your time, effort and money. The ROI approach to web design is different. We believe that to lay the groundwork for long-term success you must first get the most value out of your *qualified* traffic.

In the short term, the most valuable qualified visitors to your site are potential clients with a legitimate case who have already been to your office, been given your name by a trusted source or been influenced by one of your branding efforts in the community. These visitors are highly motivated and don't need to be sold with bold statements, fancy video introductions and large calls to action. They have a good impression of your brand. They believe that you are professionally competent, connected to your clients and concerned about your community. Instead of being re-sold, they only need to be reassured that what they already know about your firm is true.

Potential clients are also just a portion of the qualified visitors that will come to your site. Referral sources -- your professional networks, current and former clients, friends and contacts in the community -- will also be exposed to your firm's message. Reporters (from both traditional and new media outlets) will visit to learn more about what motivates your actions and gauge your suitability as a source or a story. Insurance adjusters and opposing counsel, even judges and jurors may scrutinize how you present yourself to try and determine your character and the character of the clients you represent.

Each of these qualified visitors has a different reason for wanting to learn more about your firm, and each can be a valuable part of your firm's success and contribute to your good reputation. Presenting only one message designed to capture only a tiny fraction of your audience -- those who have never heard of you but might have a case -- not only trivializes all the other different kinds of visitors to your site, it also very likely alienates the ones who might otherwise be willing to hire or recommend your firm.

You've already spent years building your reputation and cultivating your referral sources. In the following pages, we'll show you simple but effective steps that will help you leverage that work and gain increased returns on your investment. First and foremost, we'll help you convert the potential clients that are already coming to your site. Next, we'll help you build a platform to create and strengthen relationships that lead to increased referrals and help steer potential clients your way. Finally, we'll show you how by creating a resource that's better for all of your visitors -- not just potential clients -- you'll actually end up with the kind of high-ranking, high-conversion site you were hoping to build in the first place.

PART ONE

Converting Potential Clients (*Who Are Already Visiting Your Site*)

Who are the most important visitors to your site? If you're like most firms, that's an easy answer -- potential clients. Potential clients represent financial stability, future cash flow and long-term growth opportunities for your firm. They also represent the next generation of "satisfied customers" who will help spread the word about you and your services ensuring even more success in the years to come. In short, they're the lifeblood of your practice.

But all potential clients aren't the same. In the short run, the on-site visitors with the biggest impact on your firm are the ones who both need help now *and* are already interested in hiring you because of a recommendation or your reputation in the community. This select group of visitors on the verge of becoming new clients is so fundamental to a firm's success that it's almost impossible for a practice to stay in business without them. Yet, shockingly, this group is almost never considered when a firm sets out to build a new site.

Consider your own statistics. How many of your current clients came from a referral or recommendation? How many came exclusively from search? Across the country, most firms report referral clients outnumber web-only clients anywhere from 2-1 up to 20-1 and beyond. Given those ratios and the fact that nearly every one of these potential clients will visit your site before they make their final decision to hire your firm, is your current site really delivering the most effective message to the most important audience?

Think about it another way -- A potential client comes to your office. They've been referred by a friend, a family member or someone else they trust. They've heard good things about you, your firm and what it stands for. Now they just want to be sure. What do you do with that kind of visitor? How do you reassure them they've made the right choice?

Do you treat them like a respected guest, a friend of a friend? Do you share your professional experience, your commitment to communicate, your concern for your community? Do you remind them that in your office clients always come first? Or do you treat them like a stranger in off the street? Do you give them the hard sell? Do you nervously keep handing them your card, your brochure, some branded trinkets and reminding them to call out of fear they'll never be back?

The answer seems obvious. But consider how the vast majority of plaintiffs firms' sites are structured and the message they deliver. A visitor to these sites would assume that a firm's only goal is to capture new business before the competition comes along and snatches it up first. If a visitor is already all but committed to you as a client, is that really the message your firm wants to send? Does that kind of message draw a potential client in or push them further away?

The majority of potential clients visiting your site are going to be there because they've been referred to you, you've been recommended to them, or they've been influenced by your branding efforts somewhere along the way. They're already interested in your firm. In fact, they're probably close to committed. They're looking for a reason to say "yes" but they're willing to move on if they don't like what they see. The best way to impress these visitors is to show them how much you will care about them if they become a client by showing them how much you care about the clients you already have.

ACTION STEPS

Emphasize Your Commitment to Client Service

COMMITMENT TO CLIENTS, PURPOSE AND VALUES

Display your client service "commitment" along with statements detailing your purpose and values. Let clients (current and prospective) know you have a plan in place that makes sure their needs always come first.

Develop a section labeled "Service" or "The Kind of Service You Can Expect" and list a handful of carefully chosen standards you expect everyone in your firm to live up to.

Keep your firm's purpose front-and-center by making your purpose statement a focal point of your site.

Communicate your firm's values by creating a list of character traits and personal qualities you believe in most.

CLIENT SERVICES SECTION

Create a "Client Services" section that is featured on your home page. Show your commitment to your clients by including everything they need to help them connect in one convenient and easy-to-access location:

Provide one-click access to contact information for your attorneys and paralegals (be sure to include phone numbers, email addresses, Facebook and Twitter links, etc.)

Display your office hours and directions to your location(s).

Make available any free educational or training resources you offer or suggest for their benefit (books, guides, tutorials, etc.)

CLIENT SUCCESS STORIES

Create a section where stories can be posted about the ongoing success in the lives of your clients. Demonstrate your commitment to the value of long term relationships with your clients by showing how proud you are of their accomplishments.

Think beyond jury awards or settlements by sharing client stories of personal accomplishments or family achievements (graduations, new jobs, community service)

Post a new story at least once a month (this is also great content for newsletters, etc.)

Feature an excerpt from the most recent post on your home page.

PART TWO

Creating and Strengthening Relationships that Lead to Referrals

Effective communication means delivering different messages to different audiences based on their individual interests, desires and needs. Potential clients want to know how you deal with current clients. Current clients need information relevant to their particular case. Former clients want to know that they still mean something to you now even though their case is over. Three different kinds of clients. Three different types of messages. To communicate effectively, you need a place where everyone can come to find what they need. You need a relationship hub.

Your firm's website is a centralized location where many different groups with many different motivations visit at many different times, and all of them leave with exactly the same thing -- a clearer picture of who they believe your firm is as people and professionals. We've seen how your site can be used as an effective tool to help convince referred clients that they've made the right choice. But there are other key relationships that over time can be just as important, and if treated correctly will lead to even more referrals.

Professional Networks

You may have never thought of your professional networks spending time on your website. Unless they need your particular services for themselves or their family, you might assume they wouldn't even bother. Chances are before someone considers making you a referral they're going to spend time investigating who you are and what you're all about. They're also going to look at how you present those things to others. The easiest way for them to do that is online.

To most professionals a referral is the most important thing they can give, because the referral directly reflects on them. Suddenly their relationships and reputation are now riding on yours. If your website is unhelpful, unprofessional or simply a victim of too much "Look at me!" marketing, someone who was willing to refer a case may simply move on. You've lost a new client -- and more. Your website should be designed in a way that your networks feel good about passing along your name, and web site address, to others. More than that, it should provide referrers with a "cheat sheet" of important information that quickly reminds them of the best things about you and your firm.

Media

Why should the media care about what you have to say? What makes you worth listening to or interviewing or providing a quote for a story? Today, "the media" ranges from an internet blogger to your local newspaper to the national network news -- and everywhere in between. In this age of online, on-demand, real-time reporting, regardless of your size or location, your firm has a legitimate opportunity to become a spokesman for your practice area on a local, national and even global level, as long as you can establish your expertise.

When you look at your firm's website as an online brochure or as a digital yellow pages ad, it's easy to lose sight of the big picture. The big picture is a global audience of billions has access to the web and through the web has access to your firm. Hundreds may visit now, hundreds of thousands with the right story and a link. It's more likely though that the big picture for your firm is over the years you'll have opportunities for the local media to connect with you through your website. If they like what they see, they'll promote it. If they don't, they'll move on to the firm down the street. In many ways, that choice is up to you.

Community

Community involvement is growing exponentially. The emerging generation is committed to getting connected and giving back. That means that the emerging generation of clients and referrers are committed to those same things. So how will you and your firm connect with this connected generation and build the relationships you need to grow your relationships and make sure future referrals keep coming? A desire to change the world and leave a legacy is one of the most powerful bonds between individuals.

Your website should communicate that you care and help build bridges to connect you to others who care in your community.

Some firms are hard-wired to be community-conscious. As a group they're heavily involved in charitable organizations and good works activities like Ronald McDonald House, a local food bank or the Special Olympics.

Other firms are issue-driven. They're made up of leaders and volunteers who have different interests they fight for individually like breast-cancer, hunger or AIDS. Whether it's a firm-wide effort or a personal passion, it should be promoted on your site. Remember, what drives you most likely drives others. A "Community" or "Causes" page gives you an opportunity to promote your passions and connect with a larger (sometimes global) audience.

ACTION STEPS

Create Opportunities for Others to Connect

"CHEAT SHEET" FOR REFERRERS

Create a basic information "cheat sheet" for referrers. Give those who want to promote you and your firm to others a convenient resource that lets them quickly review the best things you have to offer.

Include practice areas and specialized education, training or recognition.

Include basic information on awards and settlements.

Include basic information found in your "Client Services" section.

ESTABLISH YOUR EXPERTISE

Create a "media-friendly" resource that promotes your education, professional qualifications and civic credentials. Make it easy for reporters to see and present you as a "trusted source" and competent expert in your field.

Include your college, law school, years of graduation and any special honors you might have received.

Include a "media kit" with firm photos, logos and bios for all attorneys and your firm.

Link to other stories about you and your firm.

Don't let "Look at me!" marketing make a reporter feel embarrassed for linking to your site or making you part of the story.

COMMUNITY & CHARITY EVENTS

Create a charity blog and/or a Facebook Community Page that details your firm's commitment to needs in your local community. Give community leaders, volunteers and concerned citizens a reason to visit (and come back) to your site.

Briefly describe your involvement and link to your off-site charity blog or Facebook page.

Display an abbreviated calendar for upcoming events, fundraisers, service days, etc.

Add a Facebook widget (or Twitter feed) that connects visitors to your good works.

RETURN ON INVESTMENT -- Unexpected Results from Doing the Right Things

In a world where social media and personal recommendations are quickly replacing search and SEO, firms often find themselves spending more and more money chasing fewer and fewer clients. And even though they know technology is rapidly changing the marketplace, most firms that set out to create a new website are still taking their main objectives from a playbook that's more than a decade old. The irony is not that firms are looking back to move forward, it's that they're not looking back far enough. Attorneys who want a greater impact in the future must look back even farther, back to a time when relationships and reputation were the key drivers for new business.

As you evaluate your current site, or consider creating a new or updated main website for your firm, it's important to understand how old paradigms are becoming less and less effective as clients become more and more connected. In the past, the process was simple -- SEO drives search results, search results drive site traffic, enough "bells and whistles" on any site hopefully captures that traffic long enough to convert them to clients and cases. For most firms all these results could be achieved just by spending enough money.

Today, social media and changes in online traffic habits are making those same results more and more expensive and sometimes impossible to repeat regardless of what a firm can spend. Personal referrals and recommendations act to "short-circuit" the search process for the vast majority of potential consumers in every field -- especially the law. Most sites are catering to only a tiny percentage of their visitors. The good news is that proactive firms can adapt their sites to reach a much larger and more influential audience leading to more clients now and increased referrals in the future.

We've seen how building a website that connects with *all* your visitors, not just *unqualified* traffic, accomplishes two important things. It attracts potential clients who are there to confirm what they've already heard about you, and it creates and strengthens relationships for all the important relationship groups that also visit your site, including clients (current, former and prospective), your professional networks, the media, and your community. It also does something else. It actually accomplishes the main objectives most firms have been after all along -- high search rankings and high visitor conversions.

A simple, tasteful and useful site for existing clients demonstrates your firm's client-first culture. That culture not only makes you more attractive to referred clients -- increasing the number of those conversions, but it also makes it easier for all your relationships to increase their referrals -- driving up your overall conversion ratio. A professional and practical resource for your other key relationships draws increased high-value links from professional organizations, the media, charities and community groups -- driving up your natural search rankings.

The ROI approach to website design is not simply a new way to "game" the system. Creating a better resource for your most important relationships is not a way to trick visitors to your site into thinking that you're a firm who cares about your clients and community, if you're not. If those things are true, however, if your firm does care about its clients, if your staff and attorneys are committed to good works, if you do have deep ties to your community (or are willing to develop them), then this kind of site provides an incredible competitive advantage in today's marketplace.

Competence, commitment and conviction are not things you can fake. At least not for long. But if you and your firm share those traits, then your website can and should reflect them. Your firm's character played out on your website will give people a reason to come and learn more. More importantly, it will give them a reason to come back and bring their friends with them.

Need More?

This document is not intended to be a complete resource. Instead, we see it as the beginning of a career-long conversation about how you can expand your relationships and enhance your reputation to increase referrals and create a more successful practice. If you're interested in learning more about how you can put the Radius of Influence Approach to work and customize our solutions and strategies for your firm, here are two simple ways you can take the next step:

DO IT YOURSELF | radiusofinfluence.com

The Radius of Influence website provides resources and a forum to help you along your path as you implement this approach. Here, you'll find attorneys, marketers and technologists who all share a passionate belief that relationships and reputation are the ways to success.

To read informative posts, watch instructional videos, learn about upcoming webinars and live conferences and be a part of the conversation as we discover how to expand our Radius of Influence, together, please visit radiusofinfluence.com

PROFESSIONAL SOLUTIONS | injuryboard.org

The Injury Board is a national network of plaintiffs trial attorneys committed to a more constructive way of marketing their skills and advocating for the public. Members work with a team of experienced management and marketing professionals to develop a customized strategy to fully integrate these concepts into their firms.

Membership includes personalized consultation and assessments, strategic planning, access to online technology and offline products and tools, as well as educational environments and networking opportunities all designed to put the Radius of Influence approach to work for you and your firm and help you gain an advantage on your competition. For more information or to apply for membership, please visit injuryboard.org