Website Design and Development: Optimizing Your Firm's Online Presence

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Too often, companies see their websites as strictly another way for potential customers to access information about their firms. While this is important, it leaves out innumerable nuances that can ultimately mean the difference between landing a client and lamenting the one that got away.

Pre 21st century, the word "encyclopedia" could loosely be defined as follows, "A book, or set of books, that divulge a large array of information in the form of alphabetically arranged subjects." Today, the term can be expressed more simply as, "What people used to find information before the advent of the internet." For your business, this means that the days of potential customers sifting through Yellow Pages or their local newspapers to find providers of desired products are over. The hard reality is that if your firm's website fails to appear on the first page provided by an internet search engine, such as Google or Bing, you will lose out on a tremendous number of customers. Fortunately, there are a plethora of things that even the most technically inept can accomplish that will help their firm's website rise to the top and, once there, display information in a way that will put their firm in a position to succeed, and stay there.

A Millennial by happenstance, I am obligated to know all there is when it comes to optimal website design and development, and increasing online presence, as well as all other things technology. More earnestly, as somebody who has led the renovation of their firm's website from the analysis of the old website's strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, through the design phase, all the way to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) review, and the website's relaunch, I feel my suggestions can truly help your firm navigate through today's online medium.

Website Design and Development

Like with any other form of general communication, determining your target audience is the first step to take when designing, renovating, or adding content to a website. Largely, this will consist of your existing clientele, potential customers, and future employees. For example, if you run a law firm, the overall aura of your website should be professional, strong, and timeless, as those looking for your services want a lawyer that has experience, acts professionally, and will ultimately win on their behalf. When a user browses through your firm's website, it should be as if they are being taken on a tour of your corporate headquarters. This is likely the first time the user will have an interaction with your firm, and you want to be sure to leave a positive first impression.

When it comes to websites, this first impression is more important than the popular idiom might indicate. A wealth of statistics show that if a website fails to properly load within a couple of seconds, the majority of people will exit the page. The following are several steps that can be taken to simplify your site, and increase its speed:

- **Use multimedia in moderation:** While images, videos, and other moving parts can be powerful marketing tools, too many can hinder your site's loading speed. The same can be said for images and videos with large file sizes.

- **Utilize plugins, but be aware of their implications:** Plugins are add-ons that increase the functionality of websites. However, too many can be a detriment to site speed.

- **Implement a caching tool (Cache plugin):** When somebody accesses a website that has a caching tool, data will automatically be saved for when that user returns.

- **Reduce HTTP requests:** HTTP requests consist of anything that the browser and server must communicate to one another in order to load a site. This includes things like images, scripts, videos, etc.

Though the above suggestions will help to decrease your website's loading time, it is equally important to note that developing the ideal tradeoff between your site's interactivity and speed is something that will take time to determine. Once your site is live, be sure to run regular performance tests in order to continually improve this ratio. There are a variety of free tools online to accomplish this.

To establish a practical navigational layout, there is a simple question that can be asked to help you and your design team properly structure your firm's website. First, think of the person, or people, you know whom have the most difficulty when it comes to using computers (In my case, my parents). Could they use this? If the answer is "no", then work to simplify the overall structure and navigational properties of your website. Browsing through the websites of those in your industry, or related industries, can help with this. Looking at the websites of your direct competitors can also be useful, as they will almost always have strengths and weaknesses that differ from your own site's.

Lastly, your website should be configured in a way that is mobile friendly. Studies have consistently shown that a large portion of website views come from mobile devices, regardless of industry. This means that your firm's website should be able to load quickly, and display information cleanly, on a mobile device.

Search Engine Optimization Standards (SEOs)

As your development team incorporates increased functionality into your firm's website, as well as additional content, a top concern should be hitting on what are called Search Engine Optimization Standards (SEOs). The significance of SEOs cannot be exaggerated, as they are how many users will find your firm's website. As alluded to in the opening, the ability of your firm's website to match up with SEOs put in place by internet search engines will determine your website's page ranking when users search for specific terms. For example, if I type "legal assistance" into Google, SEOs will decide if your law firm's website appears on the first or fifth page. There are many ways to go about improving your website's SEOs, but it is important to note that these standards change from time to time. Despite this, there are several criterion that will likely remain relevant for the foreseeable future.

Before we get started on improving the SEOs of your firm's website, it is first important to understand how search engines analyze your website. The way search engines gather data is by using "spiders" or "crawlers". Essentially, a search engine will "crawl" through the various pages on your website using accessible links in order to gather an assortment of information. This includes through the main pages and from sub-page to sub-page where

available. That being said, primary navigation that makes sense, as well as a variety of internal links back and forth between pages, is beneficial for users and improving SEOs. Additionally, broken links should be searched for and eliminated, as this will cause frustration for users, and could potentially hurt your SEOs.

Utilizing keywords and popular search terms throughout your firm's website is typically one of the most important factors in developing a sound strategy for your SEOs. The first step in this regard is to perform an analysis to see which terms are used most often in your industry as a whole, by the current iteration of your own website, and by the websites of your direct competitors. Changing headers, sub-headers, and content on your website to match these terms is highly recommended, but this is only the beginning. Terms with a high ranking should also be placed within URLs of specific web pages. This will help users and crawlers know what the page in question is about. In addition, they should be embedded within the ALT tags of images, as crawlers are unable to "see" images if there is no information attached to it on the back end. The titles that appear in search engine results, and the meta-descriptions that appear beneath them, should contain valuable, but relevant, terms as well, and they should remain concise. The overall logic behind SEOs is to reward websites for making sense to the general user, and to display pertinent material based upon what is searched for.

Overall Online Presence

A common misperception about generating a wide online presence is that it can be achieved by simply creating social media accounts. On the contrary, creating accounts is not a be-all and end-all. While utilizing specific types of social media based upon your firm's target market is a wise move, there is much more to it if your intention is to grow your online presence. Various social media accounts should be used to drive a variety of traffic to your website, as different social media websites attract difference users. Additionally, like your website itself, these accounts must be active in order for them to be beneficial. Used correctly, your firm will be in a better position to grow its overall online presence. As a bonus, linking these accounts to and from your website is positive in terms of SEOs.

Other ways in which firms increase their online presence is by posting jobs on job boards, publishing articles in industry magazines, and taking other proactive measures to simply remain "in the news". In the end, the best way to increase your overall online presence, regardless of the forum, is to remain active.

Going Forward

Going forward, your firm must remain proactive. This is true in regard to all aspects of online resource utilization. In order to capitalize on your website work, an analytics tool (Such as Google Analytics) should be used to see how many people are accessing your site, where they are looking, and how long they are staying, among other metrics. This is the only way to see, in real time, if your marketing campaigns are effective, your SEOs are optimized, your social media efforts are worthwhile, etc.

The importance of a strategic website in today's digital age cannot be overstated. If your firm follows these tips, you will be in a better position to not only grow your online presence, but your consumer base as well.

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