Legal SEO: Forget Google's Fickle Algorithms & Rock the SERPs

It happens a couple times a year, every year. Legal websites that had spent months ranking on the first page of Google search results for prominent keywords fall out of favor seemingly overnight. In a sudden shift, sites experiencing a rushing river of traffic see their number of prospective client visitors slow to a trickle. What causes this sudden and drastic loss? Often, it's because Google updated an algorithm. And it's one reason law firms invest so much time and money in website search engine optimization (SEO). But you can do something else to consistently stay on the right side of any Google update. Simply create high quality content that informs, educates, and entertains real people who are searching for the knowledge and information you exist to provide.

Later, this post offers specific tips on how you can do that more effectively. For now, we'll just say that if law firms seek to attract new eyeballs to their website and turn those eyeballs into paying clients, they should focus on offering engaging content that answers the legal questions and solves the problems clients are online to ask and solve. And forget about trying to figure out how Google's algorithms work. If your content is relevant and useful, Google will find you. (No, SEO isn't dead. More about that later, too.) Google uses artificial intelligence to analyze how users interact with search results, which in turn helps it better tailor search results to queries. Google is quickly closing the gap between what searchers want and the results they get.

As a result, many traditional search ranking factors are no longer as important as they once were. For example, today a newer legal blog with long-form content (1,500+ words) discussing a topic in depth can easily outrank an older, well-established site that offers only thin content (300-500 words) on the same subject. That's because Google focuses on providing information that satisfies real people. And you should, too.

Content is Key for Effective Law Firm SEO

SEO is the art of making Google love your website. Traditionally, you could show Google all the right signs (keywords, inbound links, etc.), like little Valentine's messages in all the right places (title tags, URLs, long-form content, etc.), and you'd subtly woo Google into ranking your site higher on search engine results pages (SERPs). The problem is, Google is a fickle lover. Through hundreds of updates a year — a couple of which can really hit you where it hurts — Google constantly reassesses which Valentines it likes best, never deigning to tell us mere mortals what those are.

One factor, however, remains constant: Google values high quality content that is useful and interesting to the people searching for the knowledge or entertainment it provides. Google's official search liaison assures us quality content is the key.

Google's RankBrain Learns More About Human Behavior Every Day.

You'll feel more confident about ignoring Google's algorithmic irregularities and trusting in your content more when you see how Google's RankBrain is designed to understand humans. RankBrain is a part of Google's search ranking algorithm, Hummingbird, that does much more than simply return queries that match specific keywords and phrases. Of course Google knows that people in the U.S. who search for an "attorney" are just as happy to receive information about "lawyers." And if someone searches for "solicitor" or "barrister," they most likely want results from sites in the UK.

But Google's RankBrain digs far deeper. It uses artificial intelligence to determine more details about the information people expect from their search queries (*ie.* the intention behind their words) and then to study their interactions with search results. Through this iterative process, Google understands human behavior more and more every day. And SEO has been forever altered as a result.

Google Weighs the Importance of Various SEO Factors Differently.

Google weighs the importance of various SEO factors differently, depending on the search query. The most relevant and useful search results Google can provide don't necessarily come from sites with the most keywords, the oldest domains, or the most inbound links. Rather, the nature of the information the searcher wants determines which factors are most relevant.

[SEO pro Rand Fishkin at Moz](#) demonstrates this idea with the example of five differently worded search queries asking essentially the same question: "What should I watch on Netflix?" Critically, he notes that Google won't put a lot of weight behind traditional ranking factors such as keyword matching, link diversity, or anchor text in determining the relevance and usefulness of a site. Rather, Google will consider "freshness" very important.

Fishkin said, "Why is freshness so important? Because Google has seen patterns before, and if you show shows from Netflix that were on the service a year ago, two years ago, three years ago, you are no longer relevant. It doesn't matter if you have lots of good links, lots of diversity, lots of anchor text, lots of great keyword matching. If you are not fresh, you are not showing searchers what they want, and therefore Google doesn't want to display you. Freshness is super important for this query." The key is that freshness is super important for THAT query. Not every query. Different factors will be more or less useful for other search queries.

Google Takes Its Cues from the Actions of Real People

Rather than rely solely on traditional ranking factors, RankBrain evaluates the usefulness of a website's content — relevant to a specific search term, of course — by analyzing how searchers interact with search results.

If your headline is enticing enough to earn clicks, that's to your favor. If people hit the back button to return to the search results, Google figures that your site doesn't completely satisfy searchers on that query. Whether they return to the search results in two seconds or two minutes matters, too, because RankBrain considers "dwell time" (how long people remain on your site) an indicator of satisfaction.

Because Google relies on cues from real people to assess the relevance and usefulness of content, their engagement with your content is incredibly important. And now, the playing field is more level. Established brands don't always dominate search results because RankBrain can value content quality and user engagement more highly than other factors such as domain authority or content length.

Real People Optimization: Providing Your Best Legal Content

Google's Search Liaison suggests lawyers focus on providing the "best" content we can. That means creating compelling legal content that prospective clients stick around to read. Thought-provoking, informative writing that answers legal questions and solves real client problems. Persuasive stories that elicit curiosity and tap into emotions so readers just have to stick around and see how they end.

"Instead of trying to convince a static algorithm that you can be trusted, your one job is to simply be relevant and trustworthy," [Oracle's 2019 Marketing Technology Outlook](#) points out. "Your search rank won't be determined by backlinks, keywords, and H1 tags as much as it will be determined by the trustworthiness of your business and real-world persuasive relevancy of your website. The worthiest sites will naturally rise to the top as RankBrain analyzes deep, digitally-discerned data points with intelligent instincts."

Law Firm SEO Isn't Dead (But Stop Obsessing Over Fickle Algorithms)

SEO isn't dead. Law firms should still target specific keywords and phrases, use meta tags, and care about inbound and internal linking and other factors. But stop obsessing over them. Instead, publish engaging, well-written legal content answering questions and discussing topics potential clients care about. Position your site as a trustworthy authority in the minds of legal consumers, and Google will naturally follow.

- Write down questions people ask. Then, using the same language they used, write and create content that answers those questions. Discuss actual problems potential clients turn to Google to solve.
- Create topic clusters surrounding [pillar pages](#) that discuss your most important topics. These present authoritative information to readers (and Google) in a natural, easy-to-follow format.
- Write clear, descriptive titles and meta descriptions that show up in search results and make people want to click. Titles need to elicit curiosity while also making the topic crystal clear.
- There are always exceptions, but in general, each content piece should discuss only one specific issue. Stay on that topic.

Google rewards relevant content, not links, tags, keywords, etc. So forget about fickle algorithms and just focus on the same thing Google does: Satisfying real people by providing engaging, useful legal information that informs, educates, and entertains.