



Improving your firm's online reach

By: Nancy Crotti April 10, 2014 0

What is it worth to get your name in front of potential clients? The price of search engine optimization, which promises great online exposure, can range from hundreds to thousands of dollars per month. Solo practitioners and small firms have to decide how much it's worth to them.

Jason Kohlmeyer of the Rosengren Kohlmeyer Law Office in Mankato has ridden an SEO roller coaster since going into business five years ago. Kohlmeyer, who practices criminal and family law, did his own SEO the first year. The firm then signed a two-year contract with FindLaw at \$4,000 per month.

FindLaw built the firm a website, did the SEO and analytics, but Kohlmeyer and his partner did not want to pay more for additional services. They started shopping.

They needn't have looked further than their inboxes. Solo and small firm practitioners interviewed for this column said SEO peddlers bombard them with email on a daily basis.

"They are the new snake oil salesmen," Kohlmeyer said. "I bet I get five emails a day promising all kinds of results. Then I get calls."

Most are from "small companies promising the moon," he added. The firm switched to a San Diego-based SEO company that had a great editorial calendar but lagged technologically and even listed the firm's website as a "no follow" on Google. The site only showed up to those who searched on Bing.

"When it came to execution, our numbers were dipping terribly," Kohlmeyer said.

The firm then went local, finding a provider in Minneapolis, but that relationship soured as well.

"You have to know what to expect," Kohlmeyer said. "We really felt we did our due diligence. Maybe, we thought, it's not them — it's us, that we're expecting too much. ... There's no regulation on it. They can promise anything."

Rosengren Kohlmeyer now contracts with a solo SEO provider, but Kohlmeyer has begun to believe that paying someone else to do SEO for the firm is not worth the money.

"Buy a book and hop on the web for 20 to 40 hours a month and learn it," he said.

That's what solo practitioner Mark Betters did, to some extent. About six months before going solo five years ago, Betters bought the book, "Search Engine Optimization for Dummies." The book taught some basic concepts that helped him shop for SEO services.

Bettors said he's been happy with a couple of SEO providers, most recently hibu.com (formerly Yellowbook). He's also used a couple of strategies to save money – building his own website with the help of some tech-savvy friends, and changing his SEO subscription to more or fewer services during a calendar year.

That only works if the SEO company will leave a firm's videos and other information online after the firm downgrades its subscription, according to Betters.

"I found when I pull back my subscription, there will be an ongoing echo out there online that lasts quite a while," he said. "I would think anybody who's serious about trying to create a presence would expect to spend anywhere between \$500 and \$1,500 a month. I happen to be at the lower end of that right now."

Twin Cities criminal law attorney Max Keller declined to say how much he's spending, but he recently switched from FindLaw (which he said did a good job) to a smaller firm, Chicago-based Market JD Inc. Keller said he wants more of what he spends on SEO to directly help his firm rather than finance levels of management in large corporations.

Keller also compared hitting that "first-page" Internet search presence with a large legal SEO company to a game of Whac-a-Mole. With so many attorneys sharing the same practice and geographic areas, it's hit or miss, Keller said. He hopes that the smaller SEO company he now uses will give his practice more exposure.

"It may be the same price, but it might be much more efficient," he said. "You might get a lot more bang for your buck."

What if you don't want to spend any bucks? There's the old-school method that always worked for Bob Hauer, a veteran attorney who left his own small firm and went of counsel last July with Sieben Grose Von Holtum & Carey in Minneapolis.

"What these people want to get you at the top of the search engine is not worth the money," Hauer said. "I was in personal injury and I never spent a dollar on advertising. But what you have to do is, number one, make yourself different by actually caring about your clients and providing customer service. What a concept."

Hauer said he includes his office, cell and home telephone numbers on his business cards so clients can reach him at any time. While he admits this method would be more difficult for recent law school graduates who have hefty loans to repay, he remains skeptical of how much quality business SEO can deliver.

"These search engines that are going to get you to the top of the Internet? Good luck," he said. "I think the number one source of business for small practitioners is word of mouth."

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