Virtual Law Practice: Success Factors

An Analysis of the Factors that Contribute to the Success of a Virtual Law Practice

By

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We have been evaluating the successes and failures of lawyers who subscribe to DirectLaw’s virtual law firm platform, and we want to share these experiences as we learn about them. Delivering legal services online successfully depends on a number of variables. There is no one formula for success, but understanding some of the factors that impact performance will help you create an effective law firm online marketing strategy.

For additional information about the DirectLaw Virtual Law Firm Platform and client Portal, click here.

Consumers of Legal Service Don't Need Another LegalZoom

Some DirectLaw subscribers, and law firms who have invested in the virtual law firm concept, have an expectation that simply adding a virtual law firm capability to the existing web site will result in generating thousands of dollars in new revenues, and new Internet-based clients, as soon as the site is launched. Unfortunately this idea that putting up a virtual law firm web site and hoping "they will come" is far from reality.

There is a segment of the consuming public that will avoid lawyers like the plague, and will prefer to purchase their legal solutions from companies like LegalZoom®, even though their solution is very limited. For these consumers, however, LegalZoom works and is what I call a "good enough solution."

With limited resources, a solo practitioner or small law firm can't compete with LegalZoom because you don't have the marketing resources to be all over the Web, on cable TV, on the radio, and every other media outlet that can influence the purchasing habits of the typical middle class consumer who could potentially be your client. We estimate that LegalZoom spent approximately $40 million last year in advertising, or twenty-five percent of the company’s gross volume. (Reportedly, LegalZoom generated approximately $160,000,000 in revenue last year). As a solo or small law...
firm, you can’t play the same game. You need to think about how to redefine the playing field so that you can capture clients that might ordinarily seek out a non-lawyer solution, but become aware of the better value that a lawyer brings to the table.

You have to play a different game by narrowing your focus to engage those consumers who will value the services that you offer. You have to build your personal brand based on your uniqueness as an individual lawyer, your unique expertise, and emphasizing your personal approach as a trusted advisor, something that LegalZoom can't do.¹

**Your "Brand Promise" as a Lawyer**

The idea of delivering legal services online can help to define your brand, but it is not a substitute for the brand "promise" of your law practice and what that brand represents. The "brand promise" of your law practice is a perception of your expertise and the value that you offer a client. Conceiving this "brand promise" and the business plan that supports it should precede a decision to "going virtual."

Virtual lawyering is just another way of delivering legal services. It is the nature and the quality of the legal service that creates the "brand promise." Offering legal services over the Internet by itself does not constitute the "brand promise." It can help define what kind of a law practice you have because the way you deliver legal services is an essential part of defining your brand, but it is not sufficient.

When you define what kind of lawyer you want to be, and your focus, you have to express your conception of your brand consistently with your own authentic voice across all forms of media: on your business cards; on your web site; in your tweets; on your blog; and everywhere you appear on the web in directories, profiles, and comments you make on other people comments. This is an essential step on the path towards building your reputation in any area of law.

¹ If you never heard of LegalZoom, you are really out of touch with what is happening in the delivery of legal services. LegalZoom, a legal document preparation service that doesn’t provide any legal advice directly – basically a legal form generation service – is now the dominant brand in consumer legal services even though it is not a law firm.
New Lawyers

If you are a lawyer just starting out, the same steps must be followed. You can set up a virtual presence, but you should view it as only one part of a total "marketing battle" plan to create a new brand for yourself as an attorney. If you have very limited capital, know nothing about marketing, have no experience as an attorney in a specialty area, don’t have a referral base, and can't afford the rent for even an office-sharing arrangement, subscribing to DirectLaw will not solve your problems.

What you really need is a job as an attorney working for someone else, who can teach you how to practice law and from whom you can learn how to develop a practice. If you can't get a job with a law firm, you need to get a part-time job doing something else, and volunteer with a law firm part-time until you can pick up sufficient skills so that you can represent clients with competence.

Success Factors for Virtual Law Firms - It's not what you thought.

Lawyers who get maximum leverage from offering a virtual law firm platform to their clients those who:

- Have established a reputation in their community for competency and reliability in a specific practice area;
- Maintain some physical office presence which enables face-to-face client meetings when necessary, even if it is a shared-office arrangement;
- Have undertaken some off-line marketing in their community to build name recognition;
- Have built sources of trusted referrals, whether from other lawyers, community sources, or networks of friends and business relationships;
- Adding the virtual law firm functionality simply expands these brand-building efforts on the web and accelerates the law firm building process because of the reach and the power of the Internet. Enabling clients to connect with the law firm over the web simply signals to the
existing and new clients, that as a lawyer you understand that in today's networked economy you will meet client's expectations of how you will work with them. The delivery mechanism is still secondary to your brand as a source of trusted expertise in a particular area of the law.

Here are some of the things we have learned by observing what law firms are doing, or not doing, when they launch their virtual law practice.

- **The law firm’s web site is not findable.** If it is not findable in the search engines you don't generate prospects or leads, and without prospects you can't get conversions to sales or clients, and therefore no new revenues. Many law firm Web sites are poorly designed and don't contain the elements that will make them findable. They are not incorporating the correct keywords on the pages of the site or the site is not sufficiently focused to get search engine recognition. To see if your Web site meets the criteria for success, run it through a Web site evaluation tool like [http://www.websitegrader.com](http://www.websitegrader.com). If you score under 70, your site needs work. Don't even think about adding a virtual law firm component until you fix your front-end web site. See our [Law Firm Web Design Tips](#) page, for ideas about what your front-end Web site needs to incorporate to be effective.

- **The commitment to marketing online is limited and capital constrained.** Assuming your web site is properly designed, it takes time to get the word out on the Web and to be indexed by the search engines. It can take six (6) months before you may see any meaningful results. A commitment to a pay-per-click advertising program on Google® (AdWords) and Bing®/Yahoo® can jumpstart your marketing program, but this takes some capital. Solos and small law firms are undercapitalized, which is a constraint and limitation on how fast you can grow our practice.

- **The law firm web site does not reflect a law firm strategy, and a practice focus.** Without a practice focus, you don’t know what content to publish on your web site. It is remarkable content that drives search engine results and good organic placement. Your focus is not your total market. It is just the way that you can get mind share from prospects, and helps you to determine what keywords to use on your pages and in your meta-tags, and gets you good organic placement within the search engines.
Once you convert a prospect to a client around a specific problem area, you can build a trusted relationship so that the client comes back to you again and again for more advice, counseling, and legal work when he or she needs it.

If your site is too generic, it is impossible to select the right keywords to drive search results. Your goal is to get on the first page of Google when a user searches on keywords that are related to your practice area.

**Niche sites do better than generic web sites.**

Defining your particular "brand promise" is the essence of doing this task correctly.

- DirectLaw provides you with four (4) major libraries of automated documents in four (4) substantive areas: family law; estate planning; small business law; and consumer law.

It was never our intent that a law firm would display all four (4) document libraries within a site, even though they are all available to you. It provides too many choices to the prospect. You have choices. You can mix and match documents within the libraries. You can focus on just one area that reflects your own practice strength and local reputation as an attorney in your community. You can choose just to give some documents away for free as a way of generating traffic and focus your entire site on just a few documents in a practice niche. Your choices depend on your law firm strategy.

- If you don't have a reputation in a specialty area of law, or a reputation in your community as a competent attorney, launching a virtual law practice won't cure these defects. The virtual component of your law practice adds to the arsenal of tools that you can use to build an online brand and to improve the client experience. However, it is only one tool in what should be in your marketing toolkit that includes off-line referrals, traditional speaking engagements before local groups to build visibility, selected off-line advertising, and everything else you do to build a practice in your community.

- While a virtual presence will extend the reach of your practice statewide, the reality is that you will still get most of your clients from your local community where you are known. A solo or small law firm is still a "hyper-local" small business entity. Don't overlook the Internet tools for getting recognized locally, including registering for [Google Places](#)
and claiming your Google Profile.

- Consider a social media strategy as a way of extending your conversation with prospects through Twitter, Facebook, Linkedin, and Law Firm Directory sites like AVVO and LawPivot, which enable question and answer functionality. Answering basic legal information questions online through these portals enables you to connect with prospects and convert them to clients without violating bar solicitation rules.

- Even if you are working out of your house in a home office, you should have a business address where you can meet clients and which Google Places can identify.

- It is possible to build a "pure play" virtual law practice but there are characteristics of this type of practice that drive its growth. These factors include, but are not limited to:

  1. A practice focus where you have a very specific niche to the point where you are the "go to" lawyer within your jurisdiction, an example is a law firm that generates QDRO orders for divorces, a highly specialized area of practice, and a service that both other law firms and clients use directly through an online legal service. An example might be offshore tax transactions, or asset protection transactions.

  2. A reputation for excellence as an attorney among other attorneys (your peers) that results in a stream of referrals to your virtual law firm site. This factor is related to the niche focus discussed above.

  3. A reputation within a specific sub-community that results in referrals to your site and links from the web pages of organizations to your site because you are a trusted authority in your practice area. This kind of linkage provides "link juice" which increases your organic placement within the search engines.

  4. You have a role as a "trusted authority" by writing and developing extensive relevant content pages on your law firm web site that is noted and indexed by the search engines. You
blog frequently about developments in your specialty area which results in keeping your web site fresh with new content.

**Conclusion**

When you subscribe to the DirectLaw Platform we can help you figure out how our technology can support your practice, but if you don't have a law firm strategy and a business model for success there is little that we can do to help you achieve the results that you may be expecting.

We do not guarantee any results. The DirectLaw platform is not a franchise, and we do not consider you to be in any way in the role of a franchisee. Your firm is a licensee of our digital tools, automated legal forms, and legal content. We can help you figure how to use these applications and tools to promote your practice. We can help you with marketing tools as well and help you think through your best approach to marketing your law firm on the web.

But you need to be prepared to develop your own marketing strategy and a business plan for your law firm and for promoting your own “personal brand.”

To summarize, if you're barely making a living as an attorney; your practice is not doing very well; and you have a poorly designed web site, don't expect that going virtual will enable you to get rich quick. There is no such thing as a free lunch.

Building a law practice, whether off-line or on-line takes time and hard work, like anything else worth doing well. There are no short cuts.

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