

WITHOUT SEO, YOU ARE SOL

# What is Search Engine Optimization?

SEO

*Herrmann*

ADVERTISING | BRANDING | TECHNOLOGY

## What is Search Engine Optimization?

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Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of structuring a Web site and its content so in order to boost organic rankings on search engines like Google, Yahoo! and MSN. Google is, by far, the most popular of all of the search engines, accounting for more than 83% of all user searches. Thus, the techniques and recommendations in this document focus primarily on improving your Web site's Google rankings. Because different search engines use different criteria when indexing a site, be aware that it is possible for an identical search phrase to return very different results, depending on the search engine; you may receive a high ranking on Google, yet be completely absent from Yahoo! What's more, search engines are continually updating their formulas for determining which aspects of a Web site are most important, so search engine optimization must be an ongoing exercise. Once initial tactics are completed, you must continue to review your site and adjust your strategies for optimization as necessary.

SEO uses a variety of techniques – from selection of relevant keywords in headlines, subheads and copy to the technical aspects of the site's structure – in order to make a site more visible to search engines. There are two primary criteria that Google uses when ranking a Web site: “on-page” factors (namely, the content of the site including programming structure, title tags, header tags, keyword-rich page text, etc.) and “off-page” factors (specifically, the number of inbound links coming to your site from other relevant, quality-rated Web sites).

### Content

The “content” aspect of search engine optimization refers to the ways that various search keywords and phrases are incorporated into your Web site. Attaining high rankings can rarely be achieved without effective keyword placement. Keywords are simply words that best describe what you do. They should be relevant to your industry, company name, product, service, location and/or employees.

If in doubt of which words to use, simply put yourself in the position of a searcher who is looking for someone like you or for something that you sell. A Chicago-based law firm that specializes in patents might use words like **Chicago**, **patent**, **law firm** and **attorneys** as well as other related terms, as appropriate, such as Intellectual Property, filings, litigation, trademark and copyright. In order to maximize your rankings, it is important to keep keywords relevant and accurate.

The following key areas of your Web site's structure should be used as launching points for your keywords:

- in **title tags** (the words that appear at the top of your browser bar when a page is displayed; these words are also used to identify sites on search engine results pages)
- in **header tags** (programming language that gives formatting prominence to headings and sub-headings on the page);
- in the actual **body content** of the page
- in the **URL** of each page (the Web address that directly opens a page on your site)
- in **image tags** (programming language that describes image files on the site)
- in **meta tags** (the brief description that appears under a site's title on search engine results)

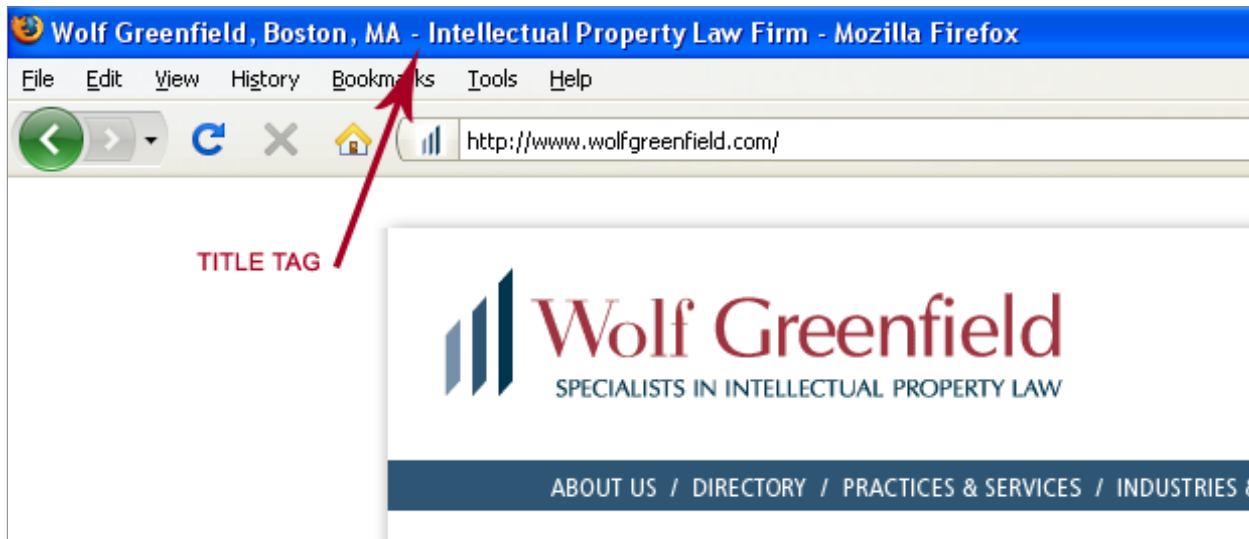
Using keywords in the site's **domain name** (the registered name that goes directly to your site's homepage) can also improve search engine optimization, although this technique would not be practical for most law firms. A domain name needs to be user-intuitive first and foremost; modifying it solely for SEO purposes is not advised.

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### Title Tags

Placing search terms or phrases in the title tag of each Web page's HTML header plays a critical role in search engine rankings. In fact, according to many experts, the keywords used in the page title tags are the most important consideration for search engines when looking at the "on-page" elements of a site – more important than the text in the body content, the text in the header tags, the URL names or the meta descriptions. Thus, it is absolutely essential that a firm take the time to develop unique page title tags for each page of its Web site that reflect the keywords and phrases most likely to be used by someone performing a search for content that is included on a particular page.

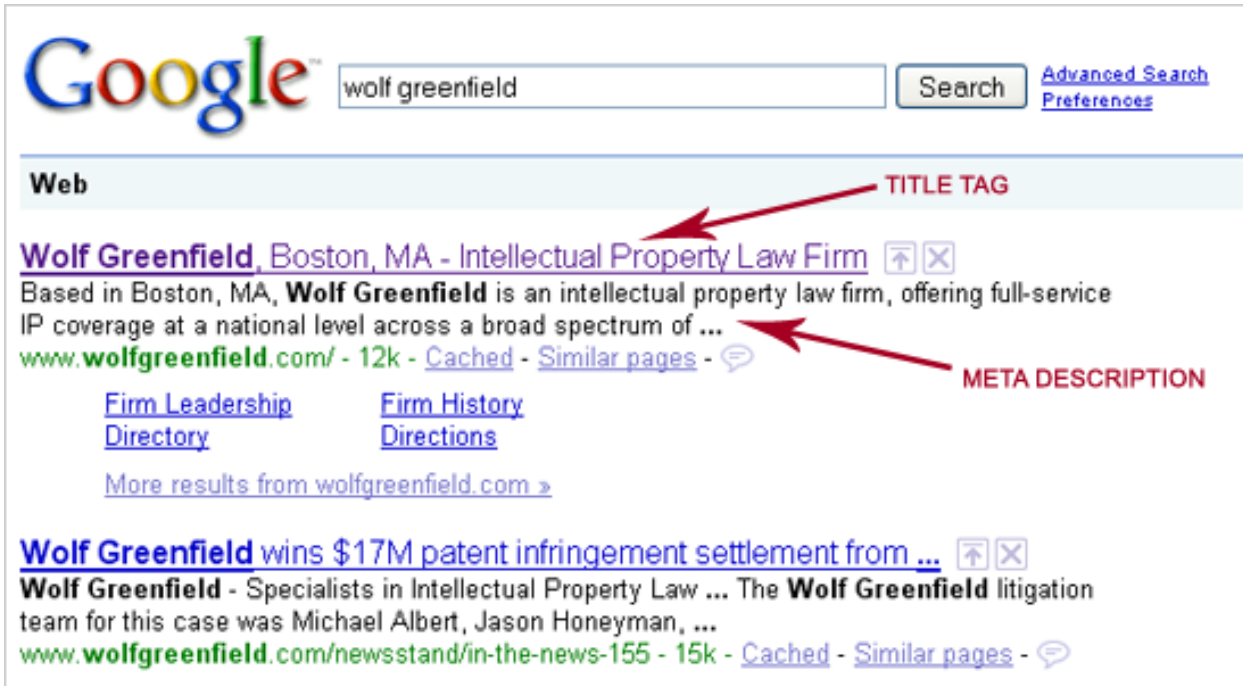
#### Exhibit A



In addition to functioning as a place to feature keywords and phrases used in likely searches, title tags also help drive click-through-rates (CTRs) – the process of selecting and choosing to open a site from the multitude of options a user is presented on search engine results pages. Most search engines will use a page's title tag as the blue link text and headline for a result (see Exhibit B below). Once again, this illustrates the importance of making title tags informative and compelling – without being too sales-oriented. Remember that title tags help brand your site; targeted keywords should be prominent while being as clear and concise as possible.

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### Exhibit B



### Examples and Recommendations for Title Tags

Page on Litigation from the Ladas & Parry:

*Current Title:* Ladas & Parry – Litigation

*Recommended:* Domestic and Foreign Intellectual Property Litigation

Page on John Barrett from Bennett, Bricklin & Saltzburg LLP:

*Current Title:* BBS Attorney Profiles

*Recommended:* John F. Barrett - Attorney for Contracting and Information Security, Philadelphia, PA

Page on Recruiting from Baker & McKenzie:

*Current Title:* Baker & McKenzie || Careers

*Recommended:* Professionals Careers in Legal Services for Global Law Firm

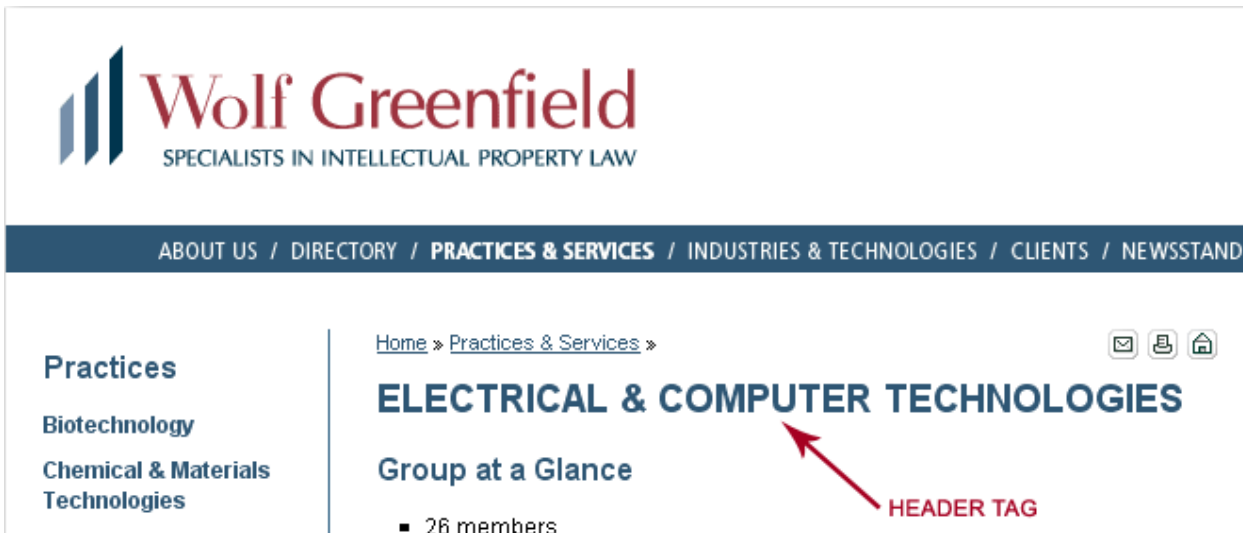
For each of the above, we recommend distilling the information into the clearest, most descriptive snippet while retaining the primary keywords as the first words used in the tag. The title tag provides the first impression of a Web page and can either serve to draw the visitor in or compel him or her to choose another listing in the results. It is important to limit the number of words in each page title tag to those that most accurately describe the content of the page while reflecting the terms that someone is likely to use in a search. The more words being used, the harder time Google has in distinguishing which words are most important. So be descriptive, but not too wordy.

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## HTML Header Tags

Many search engines analyze text inside HTML header tags (<H1>, <H2>, <H3>, etc.) and use it to rank Web pages. HTML header tags make the text larger on the page using the theory that search engines assume that anything important enough to put in larger text is highly relevant to a page's content.

### *Exhibit C*



The screenshot shows the Wolf Greenfield website header. The main heading is "ELECTRICAL & COMPUTER TECHNOLOGIES" in a large, bold, blue font. Below it is the subheading "Group at a Glance" and a bullet point indicating "26 members". A red arrow points to the main heading with the label "HEADER TAG".

```
<h1>Electrical & Computer Technologies</h1>  
<h2>Group at a Glance</h2>  
<ul>  
<li>26 members</li>
```

A red arrow points to the first line of the code with the label "<H1> TAG IN HTML SOURCE CODE".

## HTML Source Code

The HTML source code's <H1> tag in Exhibit C is extremely critical, as its function is to describe the purpose of the particular page. Search engine spiders will use it to score your page's relevancy. Thus, a best practice is to make it a more succinct version of your page's title tag and include important keywords. Even though subheaders decline in importance relative to their size, they remain useful and should include keywords that are relevant to your topic. Formatting headings and subheadings as <H1> or <H2> tags is significantly better from an optimization standpoint than simply bolding the text or manually increasing the font size.

## Body Content

How your page content reflects each page's topic is what page SEO is all about. Both users and search engines need to understand your page content. This requires ensuring that text in titles, headlines and body content match and that the text is focused on a single or a few select key phrases.

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If you are trying to target a specific phrase such as “intellectual property law,” it is useful to know its keyword density – how often it is used throughout the page. The placement of the phrase is also important; some positions carry more weight than others with the title element being the most important. However, loading up on keywords in your body text just to achieve a specific keyword density can result in poorly written copy that reduces the impact of your message. This practice could also incur a penalty by search engines. In most cases, through the natural description of your firm’s work and expertise, your body copy will already include various keywords and phrases, but the higher up in the content they can go (without negatively impacting the readability of the text), the better.

It is also important to continually add fresh content to your Web site. Major search engines not only look at what the content says, but also how recently it has been updated. Search engines will give higher rankings to sites having relevant content that is updated and added to on a regular basis.

### *HTML Bold Tags*

Bolding certain words in your content can add value to those words in the HTML text.

### *URLs*

The URL you use should be as descriptive and as brief as possible. This practice allows visitors and search engines that see only the URL to be able to predict what they will find on the page. If, for example, your site’s structure has several levels of files and navigation, the URL should reflect this through the use of folders and subfolders.

To illustrate this, we looked for several URLs that would open pages relating to a Biotechnology practice group. Here is what we found:

#### *Hunton & Williams*

[http://www.hunton.com/practices/practice\\_detail.aspx?gr\\_H4ID=1095](http://www.hunton.com/practices/practice_detail.aspx?gr_H4ID=1095)

#### *Vinson & Elkins*

[http://www.vinson-elkins.com/practices/practice\\_detail.aspx?pracid=3296&id=2922&grpid=1](http://www.vinson-elkins.com/practices/practice_detail.aspx?pracid=3296&id=2922&grpid=1)

#### *Wolf Greenfield*

[http://www.wolfgreenfield.com/practices\\_services/biotechnology](http://www.wolfgreenfield.com/practices_services/biotechnology)

With both the Hunton & Williams and Vinson & Elkins sites, a user is not provided any clues to the URL’s content. Conversely, with Wolf Greenfield’s much more logical URL, it is easy to surmise that a review of a Biotechnology practice group is the likely topic of the page.

Descriptive URLs have the additional benefit of serving as their own anchor text (visible, clickable text in a hyperlink) when copied and pasted as links in forums, blogs or other online venues. In the Wolf Greenfield example, a search engine might see the URL as:

**[http://www.wolfgreenfield.com/practices\\_services/biotechnology](http://www.wolfgreenfield.com/practices_services/biotechnology)**

In this case, the search engine would give ranking credit to the page for terms used in the URL like practices, services, biotechnology, biotech and technology. The parsing and breaking of terms is subject to the search engine’s analysis, but the potential of earning this additional credit makes writing friendly, usable URLs worth the extra effort.

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In addition to the issues of brevity and clarity, it is also important to limit URLs to as few dynamic parameters as possible. In the Hunton & Williams and Vinson & Elkins examples, the dynamic parameters are shown as `gr_H4ID=1095`, `pracid=3296`, etc. While the technical requirements of some Web sites require the use of dynamic parameters in order to provide the data required to retrieve the proper records, it should be avoided if at all possible.

In both the Hunton & Williams and Vinson & Elkins URLs, there are two or more dynamic parameters employed. In an ideal site, there should never be more than two. Search engine representatives have confirmed that there have been numerous occasions where URLs with more than two dynamic parameters have not been properly recognized. Using the technique known as a “spider,” search engines scan Web pages for text and add content to their databases. Choosing URLs that can be easily read and effectively spidered is an important objective to consider as you design and program your site.

### Image ALT Tags

Alternate text – more commonly known as an ALT tag – is displayed when the Internet user hovers the mouse arrow over an image. Exhibit D shows an example of an ALT tag.

#### *Exhibit D*



While ALT tags aren’t as important as other SEO tools in a very competitive area, but using them wisely will help people with disabilities who use assistive technology; people with low bandwidth connections who may opt not to load graphics; and people using PDAs and other handheld devices to better view your site.

An ALT attribute should not be used as a description for an image, though many people use it in that fashion. The words used within an image’s ALT attribute should be its text equivalent, conveying the same information or serving the same purpose as the image.

For example:

- If a search button is a magnifying glass or binoculars, its ALT text should be “search” or “find,” not “magnifying glass” or “binoculars.”
- If an image is meant to convey the literal contents of the image, then a description is appropriate. An example would be a photograph on your site.
- If it is meant to convey data, like the firm’s logo, then that data (in this case, the firm name) is what is appropriate.

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### Meta Tags

Meta tags once held the distinction of being the primary realm of SEO specialists. Today, the use of meta tags, particularly the meta keywords tag, has diminished to an extent that search engines no longer use them in their ranking of pages. However, the meta description tag can still be of some importance, as several search engines use this tag to display the snippet of text placed below the clickable title link one views on a search engine's results pages.

In Exhibit B, an illustration of a Google Search Engine Results Page (SERP) shows the importance of effective meta descriptions and title tags. It is on this page that searchers generally make their decision as to which result to click. While the meta description tag may have little to no impact on how high a page ranks, it can significantly impact the number of visitors who are driven to open a page. It is important to note that meta tags are not universally used on the SERPs, but can be seen (at the discretion of the search engine) if the description is accurate, well-written and relevant to the searcher's query.

### **Inbound Links**

One of the most important criteria used by search engines to rank your pages is the number of quality inbound links that are being generated to your site from other Web sites. Many experts think that inbound links account for approximately 50% of Google's ranking formula. Quality and quantity are the criteria that resonate with search engines and every firm should develop a strategic inbound links program. Although you do not control how other sites are programmed (thereby making it impossible to regulate how some inbound links are generated and where they originate), a firm with a comprehensive strategy for building the number of inbound links to its site will be able to positively impact its search engine rankings, especially with Google.

The Google search algorithm treats every link it encounters like a "vote" for a particular Web page. When another site links to your site (an inbound link), it is essentially casting a vote for your site. For example, if you are a Chicago-based IP firm and a respected blog on IP law refers to one of your firm's important litigation cases and includes a link to the litigation practice description on your Web site, Google will look at all those factors, see the relationship, and likely increase your Web site ranking for keywords dealing with IP litigation. The goal is to get as many inbound links coming into your site from as many relevant, high-quality sites as possible. Relevancy is key – if the content on the other site and the content of the page they're linking to on your site match, Google considers it to be a higher quality inbound link. It is also important that the site linking to you has a high page rank of its own. Sites with high traffic rates and popularity typically have higher page ranks because other sites are linking to them. Sites that boast a higher number of inbound links are ones you want to have linking to you. Sites with few or no inbound links of their own will not improve your rankings score, even if the content on those sites is relevant to your firm's work.

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Important criteria associated with inbound links includes:

- **anchor text** (the text used in the link to your site)
- **variety in that anchor text** (repetitive text like “Intellectual Property Lawyers in Chicago” implies you’ve campaigned for the link)
- **the authority of the linking site** (a link from Findlaw.com carries a lot more authority than a link from Legalresourcelinks.com)
- **the relevancy of the linking site** (links from personal blogs or free directories don’t count as much as those from industry authorities or law journals)
- inbound links pointing to a **variety of destination pages** – not just your homepage

How do you get quality sites to link to you? Here are a few tactics that – when used effectively – combine to help generate quality inbound traffic:

*Audit Your Site ... and Your Competitors’ Sites:* The first step in the link-building process is to audit your Web site and determine what inbound links you are currently getting, and where they originate. You may be surprised to learn who else out there is already linking to you. Once you have that benchmark, you can effectively track the impact of your inbound links campaign. Herrmann Advertising Design/Communications has the software that will not only tell you who is linking to your site, but also allow you to review competitor Web sites and discover who is linking to them. Knowing what your competition is doing will also provide your firm with strategies for improving your own inbound links score.

*Blogs:* Utilizing blogs is an excellent method for building the number of inbound links pointing to your Web site. Posting articles, comments or white papers on well-respected, popular blogs within your industry (and incorporating links back to your Web site), is an excellent way to improve your site’s page rank (provided the blogs you’re connected to have a high number of inbound links of its own). Better still, attorneys or practice groups within the firm could develop their own blogs to focus on specific areas or types of casework. These blogs, in turn, would then include links to news articles, attorney biographies, practice descriptions and other pages on the firm’s main Web site. This attracts other bloggers, who may post a link to your blog. Be aware, however, that the development and continued maintenance of a blog is not an easy task and requires an ongoing commitment from the firm to keep information fresh and newsworthy. Along the same lines as a blog, the firm could post articles and white papers to entries on Wikipedia or develop its own Wiki site centered on a particular issue or area. This not only benefits your search engine optimization, but also helps position the firm as a trusted authority in particular fields.

*Social Links:* When you think you have a great piece of content, submit it to the socialsphere – sites like Digg, Reddit, del.icio.us, StumbleUpon, and any smaller social sites you know of. If you are an active user of forums or blogs, make sure your signature file has a link. But beware of becoming a forum/blog/comment spammer. It doesn’t work, makes you and your site look bad, and takes away time from building good links. Also, consider using LinkedIn and Twitter to post content relevant to your company or industry while linking back to your Web site. However, involvement with social networking sites requires a commitment from the firm to monitor sites and any address reputation management issues that might detract from your desired brand image.

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*Ask for Links:* If you have associates and peers online (and most people do), why not ask for a link? If your online community likes your content, they might link to you. If the firm is part of several organizations or associations, there may be mutual benefits from the development of a reciprocal links program.

*Directory Links:* This is the easiest way to get links, but perhaps the worst. Do not submit your site to 200 directories – those links are usually worthless and associate your site with low-quality sites. However, submitting your site to a few quality directories is advised (you can often gauge a site's quality by its Alexa rating). Respected Internet directories include DMOZ (open directory project) and Google Maps (local search results).

*Pay for Links:* In recent years, this has become a popular mode of link-building, although Google frowns upon it (and in a recent Page Rank update, has punished various Web sites for participating). So proceed with caution, but know that many people use this option. There are exceptions to this rule: sites like Best of the Web and Yahoo! provide paid listing/reviews that actually do help you in SEO.

*Link Bait:* The current buzzword of link-building, "link bait," is any content that gives people reason to link to you. What makes good link bait? In the world of law, it might be great articles, breaking industry news items, insight on state or federal legislation, attractive career opportunities, think tank forums, or anything else your target audience might find informative or enticing. Make sure any news content posted on your Web site includes an RSS feed. In addition to posting this content on your Web site, you can also submit it to social news sites (like Digg or Fetch) to help create a buzz.

*Hire a Link Builder:* There are companies that specialize in developing link-building campaigns. That's all they do, 24/7. Consider reaching out to one of these companies to either develop and manage a link building campaign for your firm from start to finish, or train you and your staff on ways to manage it in-house. If you are interested in this type of service, Herrmann can recommend a number of link-building specialists.

## Google AdWords

Google AdWords is a pay-per-click advertising product where you bid on certain keywords and key phrases used in performing searches. When someone types in those phrases, a short text ad for the firm (along with a link back to the firm's Web site) will appear in Google's Sponsored Links column on the right-hand side of the results page. A firm can bid on an unlimited number of keywords and key phrases, but will only be charged by Google when a user actually clicks on the displayed text ad. It is not uncommon for an AdWords campaign to consist of 1,000 or more keywords and key phrases in a single campaign. The order of the Sponsored Links listing is based on how much you are willing to pay for a click-through on a particular phrase – those willing to pay more are listed higher up on the page. Although a Google AdWords campaign will not impact your site's organic search result listings (the main search results on the left-hand side of the page), studies have shown that companies having a high organic ranking, and a corresponding AdWords ad on the same results page experience higher CTRs.



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### Tracking Visitors

As part of a comprehensive Web site strategy, firms should actively monitor who is coming to the site, where they are coming from and what sections of the site they are viewing. Most hosting companies offer visitor tracking software that is available to clients. Google also offers the free Google Analytics program that provides in-depth reports on how many visitors are coming to your site over a given time period; how they are getting to your site (through search engines, typing the address in directly or through other Web sites); what keywords they're using to find you in search results; what pages they're visiting once they get there; how long they're staying on the site; and other valuable qualitative and quantitative data you can analyze in order to develop ongoing Web site and business development strategies. Moving beyond what these programs can provide, Herrmann offers software solutions that allow you to identify the names and locations of the companies that are visiting your Web site. Imagine the business development potential of alerting your partners to the fact that someone from the New York office of "Fortune 500 Company A" came to the firm's Web site on Friday morning, spent 5 minutes and 23 seconds on the site and visited multiple pages, including a key practice description, a news item related the one of the firm's successes in that area, and the biographies of several attorneys that are part of that particular practice group, including the practice chair. Herrmann can provide more information on this tracking software at the firm's request.

## Developing a Digital Marketing Strategy Outline

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### Conduct a Site Audit

- Review your site
  - Where does your site currently rank when using key search phrases?
  - What types of title tags, header tags, image tags and meta descriptions are you currently using?
  - Is the existing content filled with keywords and phrases that your target market would likely search for?
  - What is your site's current page rank?
  - What other sites are linking to your site?
  - How is your site currently programmed? Does it use CSS and other programming structures that are friendly for search engines to review?
- Review competitor sites
  - How do they rank for your keywords and phrases? How are they incorporating those keywords into their sites?
  - What is their page rank?
  - What other Web sites are linking to their site?

### Optimize Your Site Content

- Determine important keywords and key phrases, then incorporate into:
  - Title tags
  - Header tags
  - Body content
  - URLs
  - ALT (image) tags
  - Meta tags
- Add RSS feeds to the News sections of your site

### Start an Inbound Links Campaign

- Audit your site and your competitors' sites
- Post articles and white papers to blogs and consider the development of an in-house blog
- Become involved in social marketing
- Get your site listed in respectable directories
- Develop a reciprocal links program
- Explore paid listing options
- Make sure your site is filled with "link bait"
- Hire a link builder



## Developing a Digital Marketing Strategy Outline

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### Pay-Per-Click Campaign

- Google AdWords
  - Determine budget
  - Determine geographic target markets
  - Determine keywords and phrases
  - Develop text ad(s) and determine appropriate landing pages for phrases

### Continued Maintenance

- Google Analytics
- Other tracking software