

## SEO for Law Firms: Why Adwords is Not the Solution

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Paid search advertising programs, like Google Adwords, allow for the placement of text-based ads next to the ‘natural’ search results, and can provide access to the desired audiences that many law firms seek. But what do they actually deliver? Are these ads effective for attracting clients? How much web traffic will they bring? Is it better to offer a paid ad or to show up in the natural search results? While paid search marketing has its place, and has generated billions in revenue for Google, this is also a form of advertising I advise clients marketing legal services to stay away from.

Let me start by being blunt. I’ve never been a huge fan of pay-per-click advertising for lawyer marketing. For product-based marketing, there is a clear rationale and ROI equation for placing text advertisements next to commercial search terms. For service-based marketing, however, pay-per-click advertising presents several issues, which I will explore in detail below.

### Is 15% of the potential search market enough?

The first issue to be noted is that of **volume**. The percentage of clicks from the Search Engine Results Pages (a.k.a. the SERPs) heavily favours natural search results over paid. As an example, see [this study](#) that shows a search breakdown for the iPhone; noting that 16.5% were the result of paid search, and 83.5% were from the organic search results. This split (85:15) is also very consistent with campaigns I’ve observed in the legal industry.

I would also offer [this study](#) as support, which shows a 6:1 click ratio between the top organic results -vs- paid search listings. Clearly, if you wanted to be the leader in your area of practice, a PPC marketing campaign will **at best** deliver 15% of the potential visitors leaving Google for other web destinations.

The volume issue is also one of brand leadership. Most online brand leaders also happen to be leaders in their search space. The two frequently go hand in hand. For me, this is a very important consideration. It is near impossible to create a leading web-brand after shutting out 85% of the potential search market. Paid search simply can’t deliver those kind of results, which most definitely *are* achievable with the combination of strategic SEO and content marketing.

### What will it cost you?

The second factor I offer for consideration is **cost**. While there are definitely costs associated with all forms of search marketing, I’m very confident that for paid search, the

cost per lead is much higher. But natural search marketing isn't free either; there are costs with content creation, SEO, and relationship marketing too. So our question is definitely one of ROI: which method gives you get the better value for your invested dollar?

As we've just noted, achieving a leading market position - traffic wise - isn't possible with paid search because of the volume factor. But if it were, what do you think the cost would be to achieve that same amount of traffic? The answer: *huge*.

**How do I know?** I just did a mini-research project, and tallied the CPC average price for every Google search phrase that contained the word 'lawyer' into a spreadsheet, and then divided by the total number of phrases. The average cost? Are you ready!?! **\$9.49 per click!**

That kind of cost – \$10,000 monthly per 1000 visitors received - would be prohibitive for almost any form of business.

If money were no object, could you do both? Yes, you probably could. But in good conscience, I can't recommend it.

### **Are you building assets or just renting space?**

The third issue is probably the most compelling for me: **building assets vs renting space**. Investing in organic search means doing all the good things that Google respects in terms of building an authority website: creating content, building your network of contacts, and generally increasing the firm's web-footprint to drive exposure to its services.

Is it a simple fix? No, not at all; it takes time and effort. I like to call it the diet-and-exercise approach to web marketing. However, the selling point here, is that you are investing in the firm's websites as investment-worthy assets, rather than a rented space, which will cease to exist when your Adwords account runs dry.

There is an ongoing *and cumulative effect* from investing in your website's published content and incoming link network. Search engines have always valued these elements, and these evolving attributes of 'web authority' will follow a lawyer's website for a long time into the future.

### **How good is paid search at selling services?**

My fourth issue is to question **how effective paid search is for selling services?** Unfortunately, the vast majority of research published discusses the effectiveness of the search engines to sell products, not services. In my opinion, products and services are only marginally similar.

What lawyers ‘sell’ is expertise; and the challenge when making this initial connection with a potential client, is to establish the element of trust. And the best way to accomplish this, in my experience, is through **Content Marketing**.

The most powerful marketing tool on the web today is written discourse. We need our content to connect with the individual. That person, in turn, needs to believe we understand their problem, and that we have the expertise to resolve it.

Unfortunately, paid search does not deliver this kind of informational advice very well. Lawyers need to recognize that this is the first interaction your potential client has with you, knowing that you've paid for the introduction. The average web user understands this; and the savvy user also understands that the natural search results are weighted because of subject relevance and recommendation factors (i.e., other websites linking in).

Once again, this gets back to establishing trust, and the potential client feeling comfortable enough to call or use the website contact form. In case anyone's forgotten, these actions, and not simply traffic are the objectives at hand.

### **Final Thoughts**

I said in the beginning that I wasn't a fan of pay-per-click marketing. Admittedly, a portion of this attitude stems from my distrust of how search engines have historically handled paid search. There was a time, well documented in this [Pew Internet study](#) from 2005, when the search engines refused to divulge which results were actually sponsored! (A practice that would go nowhere in today's market.)

On the positive side, I'm also confident that I'm not alone in this distrust. This was reconfirmed just a few months ago, when in April, the UK's [Tamar 2008 Search Attitudes Report](#) was released. The money metric? A full “91% prefer using natural search results when looking to buy a product or a service”.

So, am I really that far off when advising lawyers not to pay \$9.49 for every visitor they receive?

- Steve Matthews