The Evolution of Building Trust: Then and Now

It wasn’t so long ago that attorneys gained new business solely from reputation and word-of-mouth referrals. A family member or friend would make a recommendation, and a meeting would be set. Potential clients could look attorneys in the eye, hear their voice and judge their character. Trust was built with a human connection, in-person.

But today it’s different. A potential client’s first touch point with you is increasingly happening online and at breakneck speeds. Over the past decade, the percentage of people who use the internet to find an attorney grew from 7 percent to 38 percent.¹ Using your website, social media and online reviews, consumers are gauging your trustworthiness through a computer screen and a collection of hurried mouse clicks rather than personal interactions. Couple that with heightened competition from other firms and do-it-yourself legal options, and the challenges to show trustworthiness mount.

The good news? With these obstacles come new opportunities. This playbook will shed light on the role of trust in converting a prospect to a client and guide you through four simple steps to convey your trustworthiness in an online world. Though it may seem self-promoting or uncomfortable at times, it’s the reality of how legal consumers today are searching for attorneys, and you must adapt to remain relevant.

The Role of Trust in Securing a New Client

Like doctors, attorneys are special custodians of trust. It’s the currency of their services, since their customers are oftentimes in real need. For attorneys, their clients are typically under duress, having suffered an injury, gone through a bankruptcy or faced some type of emotional uncertainty.

According to FindLaw’s most recent U.S. Consumer Legal Needs survey, avoiding future legal difficulties (39 percent) and needing competent representation (27 percent) were the most frequently mentioned reasons for taking legal action.² These are very personal matters and displaying a willingness to be vulnerable and presenting yourself as a trustworthy partner make you more likely to be hired. Even more telling, according to the same survey, gaining a sense of trust in an attorney was the third most important factor when considering an attorney.³

¹ 2014 FindLaw Internet Survey
² 2015 FindLaw Consumer Legal Needs Survey
Trust also sets you apart in an increasingly competitive and evolving market. The advance of Legal Zoom and other do-it-yourself (DIY) models creates a significant challenge to traditional professional services. In fact, 21 percent of legal consumers say they handle their legal situations on their own, with another 10 percent using DIY forms/products. 

With the emergence of all these other options, the power of trust has never been more crucial. The key is to use this asset to separate yourself from others. You are an experienced attorney who is compassionate and can listen to the fears and concerns of your clients. This speaks volumes to someone who might be on the fence about hiring you.

**An Uphill Battle**

Building trust faces new obstacles. You only get a short period of time to make your case through the limitations of the online world, which makes it difficult to stand out with credibility and faith.

On average, consumers visit only four websites prior to contacting an attorney. In addition, 60 percent act within a week of their legal issue, and about 65 percent of those who contact an attorney seriously consider only one firm. That’s a fast-moving target to hit, much less convince them of your character.

Another challenge is that online mediums such as websites or digital ads can be difficult vehicles to convey trust compared with in-person interactions. According to a 2015 Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising Survey, online banner ads ranked 12th out of 13 mediums for gaining trust, and ads showing up in search engine results finished ninth.

Consistently bubbling under the surface lie consumers’ preconceived notions of lawyers. The law is a profession that often gets generalized, in part because the bad can overshadow the good at times. A recent Pew Research Center survey on professional public esteem ranked lawyers last among 10 other professions. Only 18 percent of Americans surveyed think lawyers contribute “a lot” to society. On the contrary, teachers had a favorable rating, at 77 percent, along with scientists, at 66 percent, for their contributions to the community at large. Add this all up and your quest to attract a prospect’s trust may seem staggering. But the silver lining is that, as legal consumers change, you can change too. New mediums such as social media and online reviews are deemed.
more and more trustworthy as more people embrace them. Follow these four strategies to help secure a prospect’s trust – and business.

**How to Build Trust**

1. **Embrace Online Reviews**

   As previously stated, gone are the days when an attorney’s sole source of business relied upon word-of-mouth referrals from friends and family. More and more consumers of all kinds rely on the opinions and experiences of people whom they’ve never met to provide trusted insights.

   Today, current clients, past prospects and total strangers take to review sites like Yelp and Angie’s List to speak their mind. Unlike the limitations of a word-of-mouth referral that might reach just a handful of people, the amplification and impact of an online review can be more potent, for better or worse. However, this isn’t an arena to run and hide from. Instead, it’s an opportunity to stay alert about what’s being said about you and to manage your reputation online.

   FindLaw’s 2015 Consumer Legal Needs survey found that 67 percent of consumers listed “reviews from former clients” in the top two criteria when evaluating an attorney. Furthermore, 88 percent of consumers stated that an attorney’s “reputation” was one of the top two most important pieces of information they would rely on when making a choice to hire.

   So what’s the best way to get started? When it comes to generating a stable of reviews, a helpful approach is to ask your past and current clients. You should inform the client that the feedback they provide will help to address any shortcomings in your service and improve your practice. But be sure to avoid influencing or coaching clients you want feedback from. Keep it simple and encourage them to describe what working with you as an attorney was truly like.

   In all actuality, people are prone to talk positively about relations with your firm. According to FindLaw’s Ratings and Reviews survey, of consumers who have left an online review or rating for their attorney, 81 percent left positive feedback. Undoubtedly, a negative review will surface as well. Respond promptly and properly. This is an optimal situation to turn something pessimistic into a trust
opportunity. It’s a chance to show a humble side to your practice and reiterate the fact that you care.

When it comes to managing your reputation online, action beats passivity. By engaging with and encouraging your clients to provide feedback and reviews, you’re not only helping to improve your practice, but you’re empowering and entrusting those in the best position to tell your story to others. Because, at the end of the day, if you don’t take charge of your reputation, who will?

Also, keep in mind some states prohibit the solicitation and use of ratings, reviews or recommendations. Attorneys are responsible for ensuring that they comply with their individual states’ ethics rules.

2. Be Where Prospects Validate

Although your firm’s website should remain the core of your marketing strategy, its main goal is to assist legal consumers in finding you. However, when a potential client is looking to get to know you before making a hiring decision, social media is where they will turn.

The numbers don’t lie. Every social media category (for example, blogs, video, Facebook and Twitter) grew in importance to consumers by 70 percent or more from 2014 to 2015. In addition, according to a recent FindLaw Ratings and Reviews Consumer Survey, LinkedIn was viewed as the third most trustworthy source to find information about an attorney. The only websites that received a higher rating were Google and Angie’s List.

The transparency that social media can bring builds trust and loyalty with potential clients. Allowing your customers to get an inside look or go behind the scenes creates a forum to share stories of your firm’s success and show your human side. Social media allows both you and your audience to learn about each other, creating opportunities for interaction.

There is, however, a fine line for what’s appropriate and engaging and what’s trying too hard or revealing bad taste. So maybe you don’t share your stance on politics. Rather, post photos from a volunteer day at a local food shelter or a client appreciation event hosted by your firm. Or, more substantively, a link to a well-written blog showcasing legal current events uses the news to explain legal issues and how your firm handles them.

“With nearly unlimited access to information online, a potential client knows you before they ever walk through the door.”

Jennifer Shaw
The Shaw Law Group
Edwardsville, Illinois
You see, the legal consumer coming to your Facebook page already feels a sense of vulnerability searching for an attorney they don’t necessarily know. Anything your firm can do to provide a sense of pride in the community or be seen as an expert can make a lasting impact.

Potential clients value openness and genuineness. Presenting the human side of your business projects positive attributes, allowing the audience to connect with more than just your logo.

3. Let the Experts Praise You

Your legal accolades don’t just look good on paper, they are powerful third-party validations that build consumer trust and differentiate your firm from the one down the street. When an unbiased, reputable organization gives your firm its stamp of approval, it can quickly benefit your reputation.

Third-party validations such as selection to a Super Lawyers list or a superior rating on Avvo are among the preeminent ways of building trust and credibility. Did you know, according to a FindLaw study, legal consumers have placed more and more trust in third-party rating services over the past three years?\(^2\) In addition, 66 percent said badges or certifications about awards or distinctions were either useful or very useful when considering an attorney. And 57 percent mentioned they trust lists of top attorneys very much.\(^3\)

An accreditation from a national entity like Super Lawyers speaks volumes to potential clients because you’re voted on by your peers and put through an extensive research process. Super Lawyers also serves as a tool to build your firm’s footprint locally with only 5 percent of attorneys in a given state earning this distinction.

For attorney Jason Paul Beaulieu, such accreditations work. “The credibility obtained by a peer-driven list selection has greatly enhanced our marketing efforts and resulted in new clients. It also tends to reassure existing clients that they have made a good decision.”

4. Don’t Talk About Yourself

While it may seem counterintuitive, not talking about yourself is the surest way to build trust. When promoting your firm’s credentials, describe them only in
terms of how they may benefit a potential client. Also, try speaking to consumers with as little legalese as possible. Rather, focus on simple language they can interpret quickly.

When considering the most effective content to greet potential clients on your firm’s website, don’t simply recite your laundry list of legal achievements. A recent Good2BeSocial.com study revealed that lawyer bios are the most frequently visited portion of any law firm website. Write bios accordingly. The key to a convincing, trustworthy attorney bio is to focus the content on the future clients’ needs, not your ego.

Perhaps your law school days are one of your most fond memories? Other than naming the university you attended and acknowledging you graduated, this isn’t the place to pontificate. Instead, share the particular area of the law that really motivates you or some content you recommend for screening and selecting an attorney. You can provide links to articles or other published works, including a brief introduction about why it’s compelling. This will in turn communicate your value to a potential client before even meeting you.

And when it comes to imagery on your attorney bio, don’t disregard the need for professional photography. The same Good2BeSocial.com study indicates that visual content is 80 percent more engaging than plain text. Professional photos give much more insight into personality. Ultimately, you’re in a relationship-based business, so photos will help humanize you online.

An attorney bio might seem like a simple, mundane exercise that doesn’t involve a lot thought. However, if you focus the content on your client’s needs and keep it professional, it can be a springboard for future client interaction.

**Trust Yourself**

In a world where getting in front of and keeping the legal consumer’s attention has never been more difficult, you need to do everything in your power to be the go-to attorney. Doing so starts with building trust online. No matter what billboard they see, newspaper story they read or co-worker referral they receive, potential clients are likely going online to verify your legitimacy.

It’s a challenge to accept this new reality. What was once a purely personal business now relies on digital transactions that can feel distant. But at the end of the day, it’s all about connections and trust. As long as you build them, you give yourself the best chance of signing another client and serving them with the integrity you promised.