**See you, SEO? Disrupting perceptions in firms' online presence**



***Patrick Horan critically examines persistent perceptions in firms’ online presence***

“Greedy”, “ambulance-chasers," “lacking in integrity”, “contributing little to society”.

These are how many members of the public see us. Well, according to polling agencies like Gallup and the Pew Research Centre, that is. It makes for grim reading doesn’t it?

For years the public have been frustrated by the lack of an independent ratings agency to help them decide which lawyers are worth hiring and which are not.

When you want to book a hotel, you look at Booking.com or Trip Advisor.

You do this for one reason: you lack the expertise to help you pick the one best suited to your needs. After all, you’re a lawyer, not a hotel reviewer.

So you look online and you’ll likely opt for the one with good reviews. This is a phenomenon known as “social proof," a term coined by behavioural psychologist Robert Cialdini, which states that if we see others doing something we’ll likely do it too.

When you see a big queue outside a restaurant you can make certain assumptions: that the food and service is likely to be good. So it’s worth taking a gamble because even it turns out to be a disaster, you can take solace in the fact that others were there too.

So, reviews matter.

In Gallup’s poll lawyers finished

fifth from bottom, ahead of used-car salesmen,

advertising executives and members of Congress,

but below nursing home practitioners,

journalists and bankers.

But reviews don’t exist in law. There is no independent ratings agency dedicated to helping people who lack the expertise to distinguish accurately which lawyer or law firm is best for them.

So, people go online, find they cannot make a choice, become frustrated and end up asking a friend for the name of the lawyer they used.

Back to the Gallup and Pew polls.

Gallup’s ‘Honesty and Integrity in Professions’ poll has been conducted annually since 1971. It asks the public to assess which occupations-out of 20-they regard as having the greatest honesty and probity.

For the last 40 years nurses have consistently featured top, followed by teachers, doctors, police officers, clergymen, etc.

In Gallup’s poll in December 2020 lawyers finished fifth from bottom, ahead of used-car salesmen, advertising executives and members of Congress, but below nursing home practitioners, journalists and bankers.

These results are fairly consistent over the last 40 years.

In the minds of the public, lawyers have even less honesty and integrity than one profession that has led to routine global financial crises and another that is so distrusted that large swathes of the population in the UK & US ignored it’s appeals in 2016 and voted for Brexit and Donald Trump.

The Gallup findings were endorsed some years earlier by the Pew Research Centre which asked the public to give their view on which professions (out of 10) contributed “a lot” to society’s “wellbeing”.

You guessed it, lawyers finished dead last.

As for AdWords, consumers don’t

click on them.

Read that again.

The public do not click on Ads.

Again, you know this is true

because you don’t click on ads online either.

What does all this mean?

It may mean that the public simply doesn’t trust us. It may also mean-in the Gallup poll at least-that the public are highly dubious of professions that seek-through clever wordplay of some sort-to persuade them to alter their views.

The professions that finished last were car salesmen, advertising agencies and politicians.

Now read that again.

We don’t like people whose job it is to persuade us.  
But that’s in large measure what we lawyers do: we try to persuade others, through legal argument, that our position ought to prevail. In the realm of the courtroom that approach may succeed. In the realm of the Internet it often fails, sometimes miserably.  
  
Why?

Why does it fail so dismally? Why do so many lawyers report being utterly fed up with their experience online? There are two answers: your website and the people who designed it.

Does your website contain such lively phrases *as ‘best’, ‘specialist’, ‘client-focused’, ‘expert’, ‘wealth of experience’, ‘results-driven’*?

These phrases are mere claims. In other words, the public don’t believe them.

Nobody believes them.

Remember that *Carbolic Smoke Ball* case? If you’re like me, then vaguely. That was from 1892. Phrases like these were deemed to be ‘*mere advertising puffery’,* in other words, not to be taken seriously.  
  
So why do you allow your law firm website to be filled with them? Who’s impressed by them?  
  
What about expressions like: *‘cost-effective legal advice’, ‘competitive prices’* etc? Do you know what expressions like this conjure in the public mind? Of course you do. Cheap and therefore rubbish.

And yet law firms up and down the country have variations of these deadly phrases peppered around their site.

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Being forced to read some dry, vacuous

drivel in the *‘About’* section of a law firm website

is an insult to their intelligence.

And they wonder why the phone doesn’t ring.  
  
Your website is probably quite average, little different from most of your competitors. It was likely designed by a digital marketing company.

These people-SEO individuals for short-have cannibalised online marketing for businesses everywhere by spewing forth a multitude of questionable claims and doling out worthless little ‘insight’ squirts from their marketing sanitiser dispenser.  
  
They tell you -always vaguely and unsupported by hard evidence- what your website *‘needs’* and what consumers *‘want’*. The public are regarded by these people as a giant amorphous blob who haven’t a clue about the business of law and who will therefore believe everything they read on your website.

Let me be blunt here: the public are very discerning, and many are more intelligent than you or I. Being forced to read some dry, vacuous drivel in the *‘About’* section of a law firm website is an insult to their intelligence.  
   
  
Many SEO company’s claim that their work is grounded in *“science”.*

This is nonsense. Science is a discipline, something which can be verified through empirical observation. If the measures I use are reliable and consistent I should get the same result if I repeat the experiment. So should another researcher. That is science.  
   
SEO is not scientific. It is, at best, a persuasive endeavour. But persuasion is never science.  
  
It is a universal truism of virtually every SEO company everywhere that targeting consumers via AdWords and filling up law firm websites with bland, meaningless phrases such as *“building lasting relationships with clients”, “making the law work for you”, “priding ourselves on our high level of client care”* is a pathway to increased business.  
  
Let me make this painfully clear: clients are not interested in forging “relationships” with their solicitors. In fact — no disrespect - most of them never want to see us again when the case is finished.

They need us to get a job done and that’s it. That’s the level of ‘relationship’ they’re willing to commit to. After all you don’t try to ‘build a lasting relationship’ with your butcher do you?  
  
As for AdWords, consumers don’t click on them.

Yes, read that again.

SEO practitioners wrap what

they do up in a sort of

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people have somehow ‘changed’.

This is undiluted gibberish.

The public do not click on Ads. Again, you know this is true because you don’t click on ads online either. The public are highly resistant to direct advertising and always have been. They don’t like ads.

This was observed by Edward Bernays, the founder of public relations, as far back as 1928 when he pointed out that the days of manufacturers taking out full page ads in newspapers and exhorting the public to buy their toothpaste, simply because the ad said they should, were over.  
  
Any SEO practitioner who knows what they’re doing should know this basic truth. Here’s another basic truth: the number-one clicked item on Google is the item beneath the AdWord.

In other words, whenever the public see an Ad online they will click the item beneath it.  
  
One of the things that SEO practitioners simply don’t understand is human behaviour. Humans are not logical and don’t always act rationally. If they did, they wouldn’t follow football teams that lose every week or drink too much on Friday nights only to suffer hangovers the next day.  
  
Instead SEO practitioners wrap what they do up in a sort of pseudo mystique, declaring that in the age of the internet people have somehow ‘changed’. We therefore need these high priests of technology to “interpret” this changing person.  
  
This is undiluted gibberish.

People are not changing. In the 1960’s one of advertising greatest creative minds, Bill Bernbach, remarked pointedly that it was *“fashionable to talk about the changing man. A communicator must be concerned with the unchanging man. Human nature hasn’t changed in a billion years. It won’t even change in the next billion years. Only the superficial things have changed”.*

Ogilvy created ads for

some of the world’s biggest brands.

It was always about the bottom line.

The client had to make money.

Plaques were erected throughout his offices so that everyone knew what the firm’s core belief was.  
*“We sell”* they read *“or we don’t eat”.*

The irony of all of this is that we lawyers, who argue propositions in court based on caselaw and precedent, have surrendered our presence in the online world to individuals who base their advices on untested and unscientific arguments.

They’ll point to your position on page 1 of Google as “proof” that they’ve *“done their bit”*. Well, no they haven’t. Being on page 1 of Google isn’t the end of the matter: it’s just the beginning. You’ve paid them a lot of money for their services and you’re not seeing the “ROI"-as they airily call it -in the form of increased business.  
   
It is simply not good enough to mortgage your business future to the hands of subprime “marketers” who do what they do simply because that’s what everyone else in their profession does and has always done. Your website is your advertising platform and it’s reflective of who you are and what you believe in. Imagine the damage a badly designed website does in the minds of prospective clients.  
  
Bernbach and his contemporary David Ogilvy created ads for some of the world’s biggest brands, work that resulted in increased business for that brand. It was always about the bottom line. The client had to make money from the ads they commissioned, or else. Ogilvy believed this so fervently that plaques were erected throughout his company’s offices so that everyone knew what the firm’s core belief was.  
  
*“We sell”* they read *“or we don’t eat”.* That was true of the Madison Avenue advertising executives of the 1960’s. It is a standard which SEO companies ought to be held to as well.  
  
If you’re not making money, they’re not doing their jobs.     
  
What does the public want? In a word “reassurance”. Reassurance from what? Reassurance that we’re not greedy ambulance-chasers who lack integrity.  
  
That’s what.