

# LAWYERS JOURNAL

## LAW PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

### The history of the legal consumer: What we've learned from the past and where we are headed

By Mark Melago

10 years ago, "Radioactive" by Imagine Dragons was climbing the charts on its way to No. 1. "Iron Man 3" took the top spot at the box office and "The Big Bang Theory" was must-see TV. Today, Imagine Dragons is still touring, but the version of "Radioactive" the band plays is "a new interpretation." Superhero movies are still going strong, but Iron Man himself hasn't headlined one of them in more than a decade. And "The Big Bang Theory" is still popular in reruns, but a new episode hasn't been filmed since 2019.

These trends demonstrate that things change a lot in 10 years, but they don't change entirely. That's what we found when looking back at more than 10 years of information gleaned from the U.S. Consumer Legal Needs Survey, a poll of 2,000 U.S. adults with a legal need commissioned annually by Thomson Reuters and FindLaw. Every year, it yields a wealth of information about how potential law firm clients find information, weigh their options, and decide to (or not to) hire a lawyer.

Our complimentary white paper, "10+ years of progress: Digital marketing lessons for small law firms and solo attorneys," outlines the major findings of our look back at more than 10 years of this survey in detail, but in this post, we'll highlight some of the most noteworthy lessons to be learned and point out what small law firms and solo attorneys should do. The white paper can be found here [www.lawyer-marketing.com/white-papers/history-of-the-legal-consumer](http://www.lawyer-marketing.com/white-papers/history-of-the-legal-consumer).

We're fast becoming an internet-first society.

In the first-ever U.S. Consumer Legal Needs Survey, only 9% of respondents reported using the internet to look for information on hiring an attorney. In 2023, 45% of respondents who hired an attorney used online resources to help make their ultimate decision. Clearly, the internet is becoming more and more of a critical source for information on legal issues and representation – not the only one, certainly, and maybe not the most important one, but a critical one nonetheless. There's nothing to suggest that this trend is going to taper off or reverse itself. Each year, online resources become the first go-to source of information for more and more people, even when the situation is as important



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as hiring an attorney to help handle a legal matter.

*How you should respond:*

Make no mistake: The internet should be front and center in your marketing strategy, and a website alone is a good start, but not much more than that. In the digital marketing realm, each component works best when paired with others – a website complemented with a blog, for example, or a pay-per-click ad campaign paired with a legal directory listing. Every facet is good on its own, but better when supplemented by additional techniques because they add up to more than the sum of

their parts.

No one wants to wait.

In the most recent U.S. Consumer Legal Needs Survey, 17% of respondents reported taking action on a hiring decision within one day, and 39% within one week. As we look back across years and years of these surveys, that trend has grown more pronounced over time. It makes sense when you remember that many consumers with a legal need haven't had to hire an attorney before. They've realized they have an important matter on their hands and want to know they have help, and quickly.

*How you should respond:*

Make it as easy to get in touch with you as possible. A click-to-call feature on a website is a good start; an answering service or chat function is even better. There's no reason to let a client with a legal need who has reached out to you go to another law firm. If you can make that potential client feel responded to and acknowledged, a signed engagement letter will be much more likely.

Mobile devices are a must.

One of the most surprising trends of the recent U.S. Consumer Legal Needs Surveys is that desktop devices have finally lost their long-held lead over mobile devices. In 2023, 64% of respondents who used the internet to search for information and representation used a web browser on a mobile device, like a smartphone or tablet, just edging past desktop devices for the very first time. Desktop devices aren't going away anytime soon, but mobile devices are going to become more and more popular and widely used (and many consumers will probably use both over the course of their journey).

*How you should respond:*

A mobile-adaptive website is one that looks equally good and functions just as well whether the user accesses it via desktop or mobile. Today, it's a must, because a consumer who accesses a website on a mobile device only to find it functions poorly because it's meant to be used on a desktop isn't a consumer who's going to form a positive impression. A good digital marketing partner will have mobile adaptability as a standard feature, not an add-on.

Even with all the information they provide, the U.S. Consumer Legal Needs Surveys of years past don't answer one question: What's next? While no one can answer that question with certainty, it should be readily apparent that consumers with a legal need will always want to find attorneys to represent them – and if you're responsive to how these consumers think and act, you can position yourself and your firm to be ready for them. ■

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