

REO vs. SEO: Optimize Websites for Referrals and Warm Lead Conversion

By Wendy Nemitz

Every time I talk to a partner for the first time at a CPA firm, I hear the same comments, “We don’t get new clients from our website. They all come through referrals from other satisfied clients. Our business growth is mainly word-of-mouth.”

I can agree with the basis of their argument. Relationships are extremely important in professional service marketing and sales. Our recent informal survey of CPA clients overwhelmingly confirmed that personal recommendations rate highly when selecting a provider. About 87.5 percent of respondents said they get personal recommendations. However, the next biggest way that clients, prospects, and referral sources frequently research CPA firms is the most revealing about the power of online marketing.

After receiving a personal recommendation, prospects do not typically call the firm. They look up the firm website. Almost half of survey respondents (43.8 percent) either went directly to the referred firm website (31.3 percent) or did a cold search (12.5 percent).

Combine the basic information of a CPA firm website with other marketing touches (*e.g.*, upcoming speaking engagements, quality sales materials, and information tailored to the prospect’s industry), and CPA firms can increase their chances that a prospect will gain a positive impression and also make that phone call.

Referral engine optimization

Ingenuity Marketing Group coined the term “referral engine optimization (REO)” in 2007 to refer to the methods that professionals can use to optimize their websites for referral opportunities. It now requires more encounters with a CPA firm for a prospect to buy its services—and the sales cycle is much longer—so online marketing supports not only a prospect’s first impression, but also the good feeling referral sources have about recommending the firm.

Good SEO combined with good REO will support a site that shows up frequently in search results for CPA firms, but also provides the kind of information that impresses prospects, referral sources, clients, and candidates.

Before outlining ways to achieve REO, the following is a cautionary tale about why a strong online reputation is important: A law firm recently noted that select representative matters and cases should be regularly added to its website to ward off the potential for “anti-referrals.” It happened that a big player in an upcoming business transaction visited the law firm’s website and raised doubt about the firm’s manpower and skills to handle the transaction. This information was shared with the law firm’s client, which got back to the firm and elevated the importance of the firm updating its website. No one wanted to lose business over a poor Web presence.

Optimizing a website for referrals doesn’t require an entire site overhaul—unless the site still uses “frames” or another outdated structure that can’t be easily updated internally. Fresh content is one of the biggest ways that websites can rank higher among their competition according to Google, so firms that can’t update their content easily and frequently are losing out on both search engine optimization (SEO) and REO. The following guidance will assist you in gaining good search results and a positive first impression with prospects and referral sources.

Build REO with SEO

SEO is still important. Your site will rank higher on search engine results if you have regularly updated content, but also if you have included strong key phrases in your content, page titles, and descriptions. For example, “find a CPA” may be a phrase for SEO, but it can also be used in your content to easily guide people to your bios page. If the key phrase is used frequently to search for CPA firms, but few CPA firms are trying to rank for it, it is usually a good key phrase.

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Inviting home page

A firm that sets itself apart from the competition has an inviting home page that encourages people to stay and explore it and, in addition to easy navigation and a well-branded design, includes messages of success about the firm. The following strategies can help improve a firm's homepage:

- interview clients to learn why they chose your firm;
- review competitor websites to find out what they promise or share with customers;
- include quotes from your best clients that are different from the competition and highlight what they value most about the firm;
- provide a few access points to explore the site further (length of visit also supports stronger SEO);
- post recent news, newsletter article topics, or the firm's blog feed;
- ensure the client portal is highly visible; and
- link the home page to social media pages and invite visitors to connect or like your pages.

Sophisticated, content-rich bios

Bios can appear like resumes, or they can be designed like a thought leader microsite (*i.e.*, a mini website within the firm website). They should include the following:

- narrative content that is brief or broken up with sub-headings to help readers scan through them quickly;
- photos that are up-to-date and either professional or personable to match the culture of the firm; and
- easily readable and navigable, as a bio has about three seconds to engage the viewer.

Microsite bios should offer different tabs that provide additional information. For example, one tab could include articles or presentations by the CPA to showcase experience and keep the reader engaged longer on the page. Another tab may list involvement in professional associations, certifications, and awards. Still, another tab may outline special areas of industry or service experience. Tabs keep the bio pages clean and inviting.

Informative niche-services pages

As CPA firms promote more services beyond tax, accounting, and assurance, the niche-services pages on websites provide another way to share firm value and

difference. Perhaps the firm has a niche in transportation. A niche page on transportation could include a narrative about services, but also list the related CPAs involved in that niche, articles related to that niche, a niche-service brochure available for download, and even client testimonials or success stories.

If your firm has a blog, the blog posts can be tagged to relate to certain service niches, where the blog automatically posts those articles on the niche-service page. This is another way to leverage technology to feed your website fresh content regularly.

Engaging firm story or history

Instead of solely posting the history of the firm, expand the firm's story to explain its vision and value to clients. Share anecdotes that personalize the firm. It could be as simple as talking about the firm's first offices in a nondescript strip mall or the fact that administrative staff sent birthday cards to clients ... and still do. By highlighting the importance of relationships this way (rather than saying "we value relationships"), your firm will stand out in the minds of decision-makers.

A firm does not have to produce a flash mob video to attract clients and prospects, but some firms are using that strategy. For a more conservative approach, videotape new hires and the firm managing partner as they talk about the firm's culture and value promises. Post these videos to the About Us page. All you need is a flip camera.

Resources created by the firm

If you don't have a firm phone app yet, don't worry. Resources can be as simple as tax calculators or an online tax preparation guide. Niche-based tutorials or a page to purchase software may also fit a CPA firm's resource offerings.

Provide resources to the public or through a client portal, but keep in mind that public resources assist with REO and SEO. For example, a cost segregation FAQ that is downloadable can be coded with key phrases and also posted to a niche-services page where it is easy to find.

If your firm does not yet have the culture to give away "free" information, start small by subscribing to tax or legislative update services that post directly to the website. This gives the impression that your firm is staying current on important industry topics. However, remember that buyers are sophisticated and will value firm-generated information more highly than generic news feeds.

Testimonials or client success stories

Requests for proposal require references as a rule. When confirming a client as a reference, why not ask the client to provide a public testimonial for the firm website? The worst that will happen is the client will say no, but most are happy to share their experience as long as they can approve the message before it is published.

Confidential testimonials are also obtained, but a testimonial with a real name and title provides the most credibility. Post testimonials throughout the site. Quoted material set off as a design feature is more likely to be read than a quote hidden in a paragraph. Make sure the quotes are dynamic, matching the firm's brand promise, or highlighting a service. Include a photo of the client for a bigger impact.

REO is an investment

Before CPA firms invest in a website overhaul, they should perform market research, such as the following:

- ask clients and referral sources to offer a candid assessment of the current website;
- inquire if clients and referral sources have visited the site;
- if yes, ask what they looked at and how long they stayed;
- find out what made them stay longer;
- determine what made them click off;
- inquire how they feel about the design;
- ask what it tells them about the firm and if it matches their true experience with the firm; and
- ask referral sources if they point prospects to the website. If they do not, what is the reason?

Web (Google) analytics can give another hint of the current website's effectiveness as it can track the number of visits to a firm's home page, bio pages, and other pages on the site. If visits are consistently low—or only spike during tax season—the firm has many opportunities to boost traffic.

Keeping prospects on your site longer is a relatively new art called “content marketing.” Every service industry already has its share of early adopters, who have leveraged content marketing to be the go-to professional for thought leadership and trends. They are the bloggers, the tweeters, and the webinar hosts. They have invested a portion of their nonbillable time to research and write about key topics and use their website, social media, and

other electronic communication to attract and influence thousands.

Not every firm or CPA has the desire or structure to become a thought leader, but the same tools that create thought leaders can be leveraged in simpler ways to convince prospects, candidates, and referral sources that your firm is heads above the competition. It starts with SEO combined with REO, but it works when the people at your firm believe that the website is a valuable hub for marketing, recruitment, and lead generation—and use it that way.

Two ways prospects use websites to “qualify” a referral

A warm or hot prospect is a stronger opportunity for closing a sale than a cold prospect searching randomly online. Warm prospects are those who have a referral to your firm (*i.e.*, they have probably received three to five referrals to various firms). Before they commit to calling and taking the time to meet with your firm, they are going to look up your website, bios, and other information. They will weigh its impression against the other referrals they have received. Then, they decide who to call first. If your website is not REO-friendly, you may lose the opportunity and never know it.

Your hot prospects also use your website for decision making. They may have already met with you and there is more than one decision-maker who will seal the deal. Now they're digging deeper, comparing your team bios against the short list of competition, checking out your connections on LinkedIn, and reading your articles or press clippings. How do you stack up against another firm in your branding and messages? What are others saying about your firm online? Do those messages match how you talk about your firm?

When CPA firms are ready to update their websites, they should think about consistent branding, but also the impression they want to give clients, prospects, candidates, and referral sources. Think about how each key audience may perceive and use the site. Use that perspective along with branding for the basis of user-friendly content and design.

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