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MARKETING PLAYBOOK

BY MARIE SWIFT

Own your space:

How to build share of mind and generate leads with a good website and content marketing plan

Creating a robust presence online was not top of the priorities list when Jon Yankee, CFP®, co-founded FJY Financial in January 2006 with Marjorie Fox and Dan Joss. While they had a website, their marketing focused on working with centers of influence and clients to cultivate referrals, doing seminars and speaking to local groups, working with the media, and being seen in *Washingtonian* magazine as one of the area's top financial firms. Their growth numbers were good, but something interesting happened about two years after they completed a major website overhaul and implemented a robust content marketing plan: prospective clients started finding them online, visiting their website, reading their blog, following them on social media, and offering their names and email addresses to download the firm's white papers and receive monthly communications.

While building out their online presence (FJYfinancial.com) cost a fair amount of time and money, Yankee says they have seen significant results. "We had nearly 100 people contact us last year – not through any proactive efforts of our own other than making sure we have a great website and that our LinkedIn profiles are current and we are doing as much as we can from a social media perspective out there," Yankee says. "As you know, in sales, it's a numbers-and-volume thing. When you get so many people calling and emailing you, some of them are going to be great clients."

Yankee and staff member Eden Butler, who handles digital marketing for FJY, have been tracking the firm's inbound client activity for several years. The spreadsheet they shared during an interactive screen-sharing session showed that "online research" is fast becoming the primary way prospects find them.

This is the new reality for financial advisors – owning your space online and being "discoverable" is essential. If all the factors line up – character, culture, and competence – savvy consumers may enter a digital dance and eventually become clients. Another important reason to have a strong online presence – complete with a newsletter, blog, and white papers that demonstrate your expertise; staff profiles that show not just professional qualifications but personal interests; and a news section that showcases all of your "earned" media mentions and third-party published articles – is that, even if they are referred to your firm by an allied professional or current client, people will search online to see how you stack up against the competition.

The O in PESO stands for "owned"

If you have been reading the Marketing Playbook column over the past year, you already know the "O" in the PESO marketing model stands for "owned." But given how much of our existence today is

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mobile/digital and web-enabled, it could also stand for "online." While other elements that fall into the "owned category" (primarily, your printed and digital brand identity/collateral items and the original content that you develop and publish on your own), are still important, you must also focus on building your "owned presence" online. If you are developing a credibility piece that can be printed and mailed or handed out in person, most likely that piece of content should be digitized and used on your website as well.

"Our goal, ultimately, is to have our website be two different things," Yankee says. "One, is to be a resource for our clients. Two, is to be a place where people looking for an advisor can find enough about us to want to sign up for periodic communications, or to give us a call and explore becoming a client."

A good website also can impress journalists who are looking for good sources and reassure business allies who could refer right-fit clients to your firm or push people directly to your website.

Own your digital home

While having a social media strategy, posting your company and professional information on various online directories, and being quoted in credible third-party media outlets are important elements in your marketing mix, the resulting digital assets are actually "satellite entities" that orbit your digital home. Some of these satellite entities you will "own" – meaning that you control the positioning, content, and branding in its entirety – but others will be essentially "rented" (such as a profile on FeeOnlyNetwork.com or NAPFA's Find-an-Advisor section).

"In the new world of digital marketing, your website and the associated blog are the core of your online presence and the virtual storefront for your business," says practice management guru Michael Kitces. "As a result, it's absolutely crucial to build upon a solid foundation, which means you absolutely, positively must actually *own* your digital presence."

What does it mean to "own" your online presence? Here's what Kitces suggests:

1. Own the domain name of your site, and put all of your content (including your blog) on your website.

Kitces does not like the idea of building your primary digital presence on someone else's "virtual farmland" (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Medium, Blogger, or WordPress.com). On those sites, you're basically a "digital sharecropper" posting your content on someone else's land.

Why does he advise against it? You are at constant risk that a change to their pricing, services, and /or business model could affect your primary online presence overnight.

I would add that it is vital to have a domain name that matches, as closely as possible, your company's name – and that is easy to say, see, spell, and remember. I am not a fan of abbreviation or punctuation in URLs. Ideally, you'd be able to secure the dot-com version of the domain name; if that's not possible, you may have to live with a less-than-optimal extension such as dot-org or dot-biz.

While Facebook, Google's Blogger, or Google+, LinkedIn Pulse, and other search and social sites are all good tools to add to your marketing *mix* (as discussed in my "Sharing is Caring" in October 2016), I suggest that you spend the majority of your time and creative energy building assets that you control or earn (the O and the E in PESO). Think of the shared and the paid elements (the S and the P in PESO) as necessary but supplemental.

2. Build your site on a digital content management system (CMS) that will evolve with the times.

A CMS allows a user, even with limited expertise, to add, modify, and remove content from a website without the intervention of a webmaster. Options include Drupal, Joomla, and WordPress.Org (the bigger version of WordPress that you install to run *your* site, *not* set up your blog on *their* hosted WordPress.com platform).

You'll probably need and want to work with a web-building professional to set up your site on the more robust content management systems. Alternatively, you can use simpler options such as TwentyOverTen, AdvisorWebsites, Wix, Weebly, and SquareSpace with or without professional help.

Kitces worries about getting locked in to a proprietary content management platform from an industry niche provider, saying some may not be big enough to do the continuous development to keep pace with the competition. However, I have found some good small providers for the financial planning profession and even some "website builder" drag-and-drop solutions (business-generic but lower cost than some of the industry niche options) that work very well.

I think that standards and visual aesthetics continually evolve, so redoing one's website every three to four years is the new norm; changes can be made to your platform during that redo. So, pick the solution that works best for you now, and then reevaluate every couple of years. Some turnkey solutions provide some interesting visual themes and social/web content options, so they may be worth the cost to you if, for instance, you're not a prolific content creator like Kitces.

Whatever you decide to do, make sure your site is mobile friendly – the search engines will rank down the site if it is not set up to load quickly and respond dynamically on various devices. Also, people are consuming more and more information from tablets and smartphones than ever before, so you want their experience and first impression to be good.

3. Offer something of value, for free, and entice visitors to not only download it right then and there but to sign up for ongoing communications.

"The typical online prospect doesn't just come to your website once and decide to do business with you," Kitces says. "Instead, he/she evaluates your website and content, decides if you're someone worth connecting to, receives your ongoing material that demonstrates your expertise over a period of time, and *then* when a need or problem arises, you're top-of-mind as the trusted go-to person for them to contact."

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For marketing purposes, the goal of your website should be to establish credibility and get people to opt in for email communications. You'll need a compelling offer – something that's too good not to obtain – in the form of an e-book or special report, an educational video or text-based series, etc. Don't worry about getting the visitor to opt in for everything all at once; if you deliver value with the primary deliverable, you can float a few more trial balloons as that process unfolds.

Just like building a compelling offer for an ad, after laying out the value proposition for your free offer, it is important to create a strong call-to-action. Opt-in systems such as SumoMe, OptInMonster, and LeadPages can be added to any website. You'll also need an email-marketing platform such as MailChimp, AWeber, MyEmma, or Constant Contact (InfusionSoft and HubSpot are more robust options but cost more and have a steeper learning curve).

Show and tell

Judy McNary, CFP, and David Gardner, CFP, recently merged their practices and redid their website. Their joint presence can now be seen at ConfluenceFinancialAdvisors.com. They determined early on that it is just as important to show their firm's character and culture as to tell why they are qualified to serve as fiduciary advisors. The company strives to communicate that creating a balanced life is one of the most important things they help their clients do.

They put out "a call to clients" asking them to submit photos of them doing the things they loved – things made possible due to proper planning, saving, and investing. FJY Financial also did this, supplemented with some stock photos. Confluence used only original photography (their web designer doubled as local photographer, and Confluence essentially gave participating clients a free photo session in exchange for their time). "It's a nice way to tie us to our clients," McNary says. "The website shows we are an established firm, but people relate to the photos."

Confluence fills its company blog with content repurposed from Gardner's longtime personal finance column for the local Boulder, CO, newspaper, which creates a nice "halo effect." Soon, other staff members will also contribute blog content. The firm also plans to create a series of e-books based on ages-and-stages of life – something that people can download free in exchange for their name and email address. Confluence will use MailChimp to send periodic communications and updates to its growing email list. The online educational and emailed content also helps clients understand that current events and market fluctuations are not necessarily a big deal.

Seminars and client events supplemented by social media activity rounds out Confluence's marketing plan.

David Gardner, CFP, and Judy McNary, CFP

Your 2017 marketing plan

This concludes the PESO series. I hope you will review the prior pieces – the foundational PESO overview, the Paid, the Earned, and the Shared articles – as you develop your marketing plan for 2017 and beyond.

Marie Swift is president and CEO of Impact Communications (ImpactCommunications.org), a marketing and PR firm serving fiduciary advisors and allied institutions. Watch for a new series of articles, focused on working with the media, later this year.