

# THE FUTILITY OF CHASING SILVER BULLETS

AN ANALYSIS OF AGGREGATE  
SEARCH PERFORMANCE FOR  
LAW FIRM WEBSITES

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# ABSTRACT

In law firms' ongoing search for marketing "silver bullets," many have concluded that achieving top search engine rankings for so-called head-term phrases (e.g., "Miami personal injury lawyer") is a key contributor to a steady flow of business. In an unprecedented study encompassing thousands of law firm websites, FindLaw analyzes the components of website traffic, demonstrates the amount of traffic delivered by head-term queries and illustrates the need for a more integrated, comprehensive marketing program based on clear goals to achieve sustained marketing impact.

When it comes to marketing, few of us can resist the temptation to search for the "silver bullet" — the one magical tactic that will guarantee a steady flow of business. For years, many law firms viewed the Yellow Pages as a kind of silver bullet — indeed, it was the only form of marketing that many engaged in. Of course, developments over the past decade have demonstrated that if the Yellow Pages could ever have been considered a silver bullet, those days are long over. That's the thing about silver bullets: The magic has a way of always being temporary.

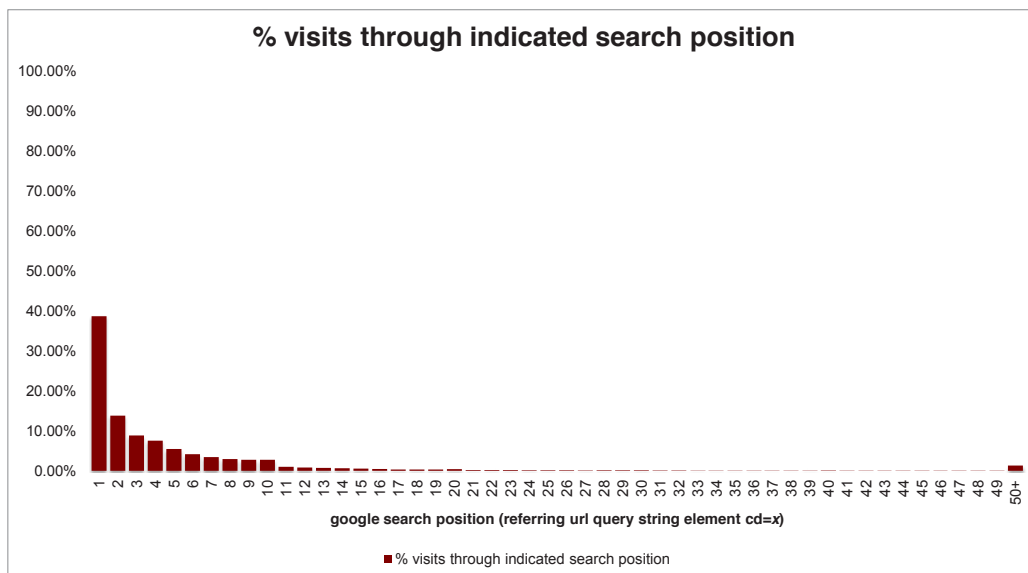
A more contemporary and pervasive example of a perceived silver bullet for law firm marketing is the belief among many firms that achieving top rankings for select phrases in Google is the key to digital marketing success. In the thousands of conversations FindLaw has with law firms each year about how to build successful marketing programs, the desire to achieve top ranking for so-called head-term phrases such as "Miami divorce lawyer" or "Boston DUI lawyer" comes up repeatedly.

A notion that search engine rankings are a kind of value judgment on the worth of one's firm — rather than the result of a rigidly

mathematical algorithm — often accompanies this point of view. This makes it even more galling to be outranked by a competitor seen as inferior. Many companies that sell search engine optimization (SEO) services understand this predilection and consciously build their sales pitches around promising firms high ranking for their pet phrases.

That a website must rank highly for a meaningful number of phrases in order to generate search engine traffic is indisputable. FindLaw data indicates that more than 87 percent of the traffic to our customers' websites comes from positions 1-10 on search engine results, with nearly 40 percent coming from the top listing.<sup>1</sup>

That said, the important follow-up question is: What type of search queries is it best to rank for? Is it most valuable to rank for head-term phrases such as "Miami divorce lawyer?" Or are there other types of phrases that might deliver more impact? More broadly, within the full context of the typical law firm's marketing activities, what role does search play in generating business opportunities? Is ranking for desirable head-term phrases the quintessential element of a successful Web marketing program, or is the picture more complicated than that? This study will focus on these questions — and point out fundamental flaws in the silver bullet approach.



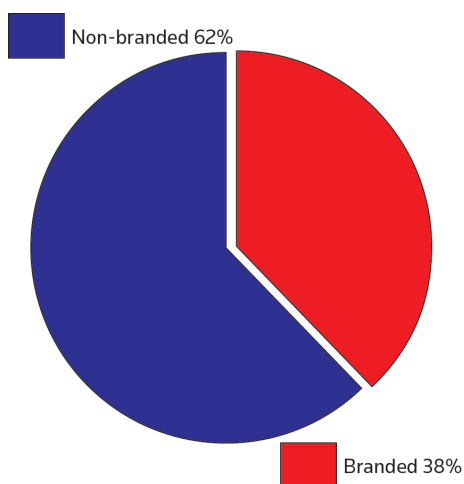
<sup>1</sup> Source: google.com referring URL visits to FindLaw FirmSites from 4/1/2013 through 7/31/2013 and tracked using Adobe SiteCatalyst, parsed for the "cd=#" element that indicates referring search position. More than 2.8 million visits contributed to the study.

## About This Study

As the host for thousands of law firm websites, FindLaw has a virtually unequalled view into the aggregate behavior of consumers as they search for lawyers. At any given time, FindLaw has more than 10,000 discrete customer sites live on the Web, encompassing more than 1 million pages of content primarily geared toward reaching consumers with a legal problem, educating them about their options and encouraging them to contact our law firm customers for assistance. Each month, these pages typically generate more than 5 million visits, of which approximately 2.4 million are sourced from search engines. This study primarily focuses on 3.7 million such search visits, driven through 2.66 million distinct search phrases from April through July 2013.

## Branded vs. Non-Branded Search

To really understand search traffic, we need to break it down into its important component parts. Search traffic, of course, is generated from user queries.<sup>2</sup> Search queries can be subdivided into two broad categories, branded and non-branded. Percentage breakdown for traffic between the two types is represented in the chart below:



Branded search queries are those that include a firm's name, the name of a lead lawyer or the firm's domain name. When users enter a branded query, they generally already know about the firm, its name, its location or some aspect of its identity. They are also probably positively disposed toward hiring the firm. While the role that brand plays varies from one firm to another based on the investment each has made in brand building, it is fair to say that most firms should expect that when a user enters a relevant branded search, the firm should usually rank high in the search engine results list. In our analysis, branded search makes up 38 percent of all search traffic to law firm websites, so it represents a meaningful volume of activity. Any competent SEO provider should be able to deliver strong performance for branded search.

Since a firm should rightly expect to perform well in branded search, this study will focus on **non-branded queries**. This is the unclaimed territory of search, where all firms theoretically have an equal chance to grab their share — and more. This category makes up the other 62 percent of law firm website search traffic. In non-branded search, consumers usually do not have a particular law firm in mind. They are looking for any firm that can convince them it can effectively address their issue. Non-branded search represents an opportunity for firms to expand their client bases by attracting prospects who have likely never heard of them. Because of this, most firms rightly focus their SEO programs on performing well for non-branded search.

To achieve success with non-branded search, a large number of firms believe they must rank well for target head-term phrases (e.g., "Miami divorce lawyer"). When SEO providers do not deliver strong performance for such phrases, the SEO program is often judged to be a failure, irrespective of other relevant metrics. As a result, a huge amount of time, effort and money is devoted to ranking well for such searches — often at the expense of other valuable marketing tactics and activities. For firms that truly wish to optimize their marketing spend, it is important to understand whether the data supports focusing on head-term results as a wise course of action.

<sup>2</sup> I.e., queries comprised of search phrases captured by Web analytics software. However, the ability to do so is becoming increasingly compromised. See, e.g., Craig Timberg, "Google Encrypts Data Amid Backlash Against NSA Spying," The Washington Post, Sept. 6, 2013. As noted, this article relies on data collected between April and July 2013, during which approximately 20 percent of search keywords were unavailable across our portfolio. As of October 2013, that number is now approximately 40 percent overall. Isolating Google referrals, less than 20 percent of visits have accompanying search queries. Nonetheless, for purposes of this study and the breakdowns presented below, our approach allocates the 20 percent unknown search queries in the same proportions as the 80 percent of known queries.

## Deconstructing Non-Branded Search Traffic

The queries that deliver non-branded search traffic to law firm websites can be subdivided into three categories:

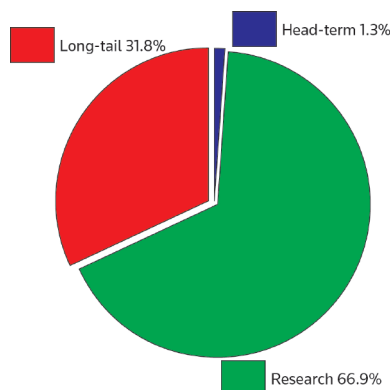
- **Research-oriented** — these are searches for legal information with no expressed intent to find an lawyer. An example of such a search is “DUI laws in California.” While the user might eventually choose to hire an lawyer to help with a DUI case, he or she could also be doing research for a paper at school and have no intention of hiring a lawyer.
- **Long-tail with lawyer intent** — these are searches, often containing a larger number of words, that suggest an intent to hire an lawyer. An example is “drunk driving lawyer in Santa Barbara that handles cases with motorcycles.” While this particular query is unlikely to be used more than a small number of times (if, indeed, more than once), the cumulative amount of queries in this category is sizeable.
- **Head-term with lawyer intent** — these types of queries are generally succinct, containing a geographic element; a practice area; and either “attorney,” “lawyer” or “law firm.” An example is “St. Louis car accident lawyer.”

To understand how different types of queries ultimately flow through to contacts to the firm, we need to consider the sequence of steps that occurs when a user enters a query: After the query is entered, the search engine returns a list of search engine results (SERPs). The user clicks on a SERP and visits the associated website where he or she reviews the site and either takes further action on the site (e.g., goes to a different page, fills out a contact form, etc.) or abandons it. The action that we are ultimately interested in is whether the user chooses to contact the firm.

Two important metrics measure the user actions taking place in this sequence. The first is click rate, which measures the percentage of time a user clicks on a SERP generated by a particular type of query. Click rate for the three types of queries differs fairly dramatically:

QUERY TYPE	CLICK RATE
Research	~.01 %
Long-tail/Intent	6%
Head-term/Intent	1.6%

Click rate on research-oriented queries is quite low, while that of long-tail queries is nearly four times that of head-term queries. Website traffic levels result from the total volume of each query entered multiplied by click rate, resulting in the following traffic breakdown:



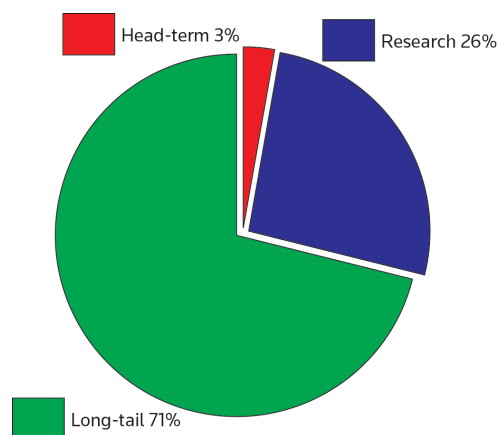
Note that while the click rate for research queries is low, the sheer number of such queries results in the highest traffic levels.

The second important metric is contact rate, which is the percentage of time the site visitor actually contacts the firm. This metric measures how website traffic actually flows through to contacts to the firm. Below is the breakdown of contact rate by query type:

QUERY TYPE	CONTACT RATE
Research	0.8%
Long-tail/Intent	4.6%
Head-term/Intent	4.6%

Not surprisingly, contact rate on research is low because many users who enter research-oriented queries are not looking for an lawyer.

Long-tail and head-term have equal contact rates. By combining website traffic level and contact rate, we can determine the percentage breakdown of contacts generated by different query types:



Let's make some sense of these numbers. Most of the search-generated visits to law firm websites — 66.9 percent in our study — originated from research-oriented queries. Not surprisingly, only 0.8 percent of these visits resulted in the visitor contacting the firm, since these types of searches are occurring for all kinds of reasons — and not specifically to find an lawyer at the point in time that the query is run.

Long-tail queries with lawyer intent accounted for 31.8 percent of the traffic to law firm websites. Because there was a clear intent to hire an lawyer, users clicked on the search result 6 percent of the time; 4.6 percent of the resulting website visits culminated in a law firm contact — more than five times the rate associated with research-oriented queries. Relatively high traffic levels combined with a high contact rate make long-tail queries the clear winner in terms of delivering contacts to the firm, with 71 percent of contacts emanating from this query type.

Head-term queries with intent are an interesting case. While a particular query may appear a large number of times in search engine results, the analysis shows that the search result generated a visit to the associated website only 1.6 percent of the time — compared to 6 percent for long-tail queries with intent. In other words, users of long-tail queries with lawyer intent were almost four times more likely to visit the firm than users of head-term queries.

The table below summarizes these metrics:

TYPE	CLICK RATE <sup>3</sup>	PORTION OF SEARCH-DERIVED AUDIENCE	CONTACT RATE	PORTION OF CONTACTS TO FIRM
Research	~.01%	66.9%	0.8%	26%
Long-Tail with Intent	6%	31.8%	4.6%	71%
Head-term with Intent	1.6%	1.3%	4.6%	3%

<sup>3</sup>This search engine result page conversion rate is based on a sampling of search keywords, and calculated as:

$$[\# \text{ of visits from those keywords}] \div [\text{estimated search volume of those keywords}]$$

The denominator can be sourced to some degree using Google's Adwords Keyword Tool. The data provided by Google is by no means comprehensive for every phrase, and complete insight into those numbers could alter the percentages presented in this column. The point is that while we can't perfectly quantify this conversion rate, we are seeing differentiation between long-tail and head-term to the degree that we can.

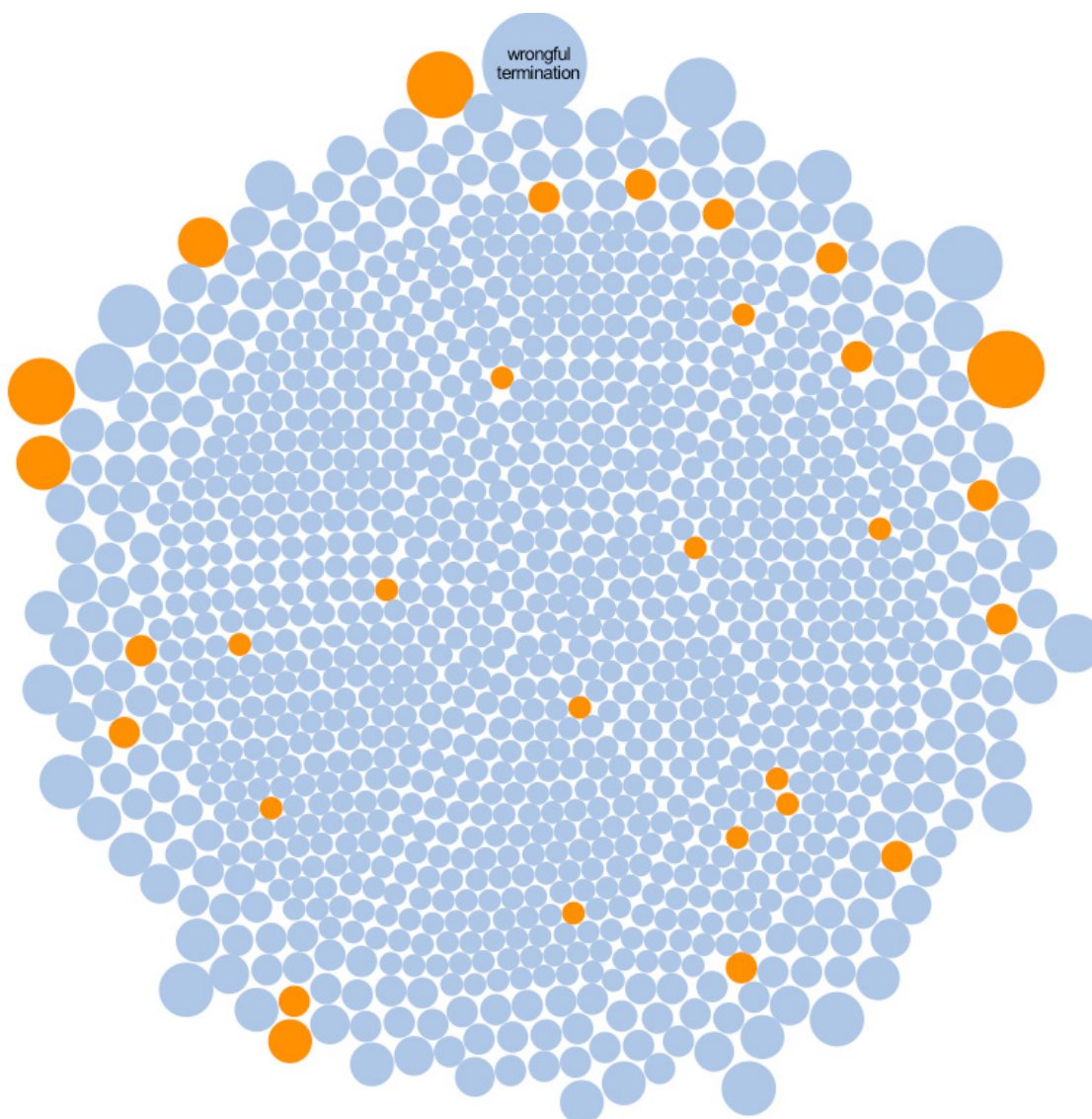


It's an impressive list of phrases, particularly in a large and highly competitive market such as the San Francisco Bay area. Most firms would be ecstatic with high rankings for such sought-after phrases as:

- personal injury lawyer San Francisco
- San Francisco personal injury lawyer
- San Francisco car accident lawyer

But as impressive as that list of phrases is, it still accounts for only 4.85 percent of search visits referred from phrases explicitly indicating the need for a lawyer. Visualized in this context, we can see that the 30 head-term phrases indicated in the graphic on the previous page (outlined in orange) make up only a small piece of the value that the firm ultimately receives (see graphic below).

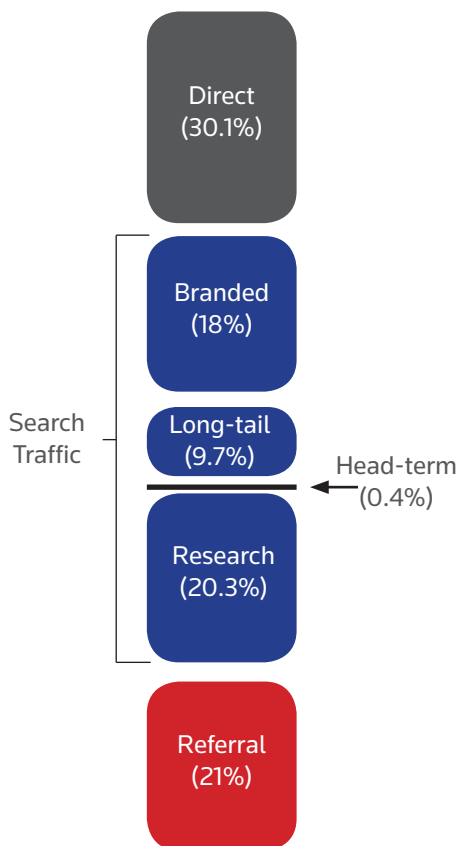
Thus, even with firms that have committed the sizeable investment needed to achieve enviable rankings for the most desirable phrases, such activity is not much more than a few blips within the totality of the firm's traffic picture.



### Placing Search Traffic in a Broader Context

The conclusions we have reached so far become only stronger when we place traffic into the broader context of all activity to a firm's website. In fact, search represents a lower percentage of overall traffic to a law firm website than most people expect.

Based on FindLaw analysis, traffic to law firm websites comes from the following sources:



- **Direct: 30.1 percent**

This is traffic that primarily occurs when users either know your URL and enter it into a Web browser or navigate to your site from a bookmark. Direct traffic is often the result of a firm's expanded marketing efforts in offline media, social media, referrals, networking, community activities, etc. Given that study after study indicates people strongly prefer to work with law firms that they or their friends have had a previous connection with, the importance of these kinds of activities cannot be overstated.

- **Search: 48.8 percent**

As discussed earlier, this is traffic that comes to a law firm website as a result of a query entered on a search engine such as Google or Bing. This can be further broken down into 18 percent from branded searches and 30 percent from non-branded searches.

- **Referral: 21 percent**

This is traffic that clicks through to your website from a different site. It emanates from online advertisements, directory listings, lawyer rating services, blogs, syndicated content, etc.

Viewed within this context, it becomes clear how small a percentage of the typical firm's traffic comes from head-term queries. Of all the traffic to a law firm website, only 48.8 percent comes from search and only 0.4 percent comes from head-term queries — about one visitor out of every 250 to the typical law firm website.

Of course, we do not want to diminish the value of traffic from these queries in the relatively infrequent instances where it occurs. But our analysis clearly suggests that the typical firm will benefit from a more broad-based approach to its marketing, placing a more appropriate weight on head-term query performance.



## Conclusions

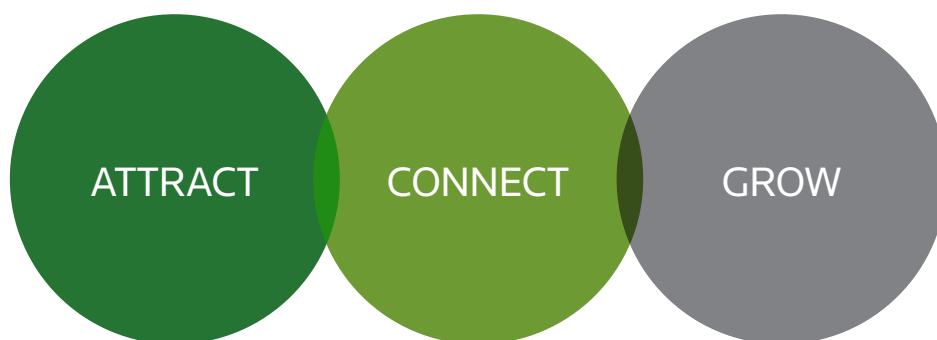
- Traffic from head-term phrases, so coveted by many law firms, actually contributes relatively little to virtually all firms' total traffic and contacts.
- Nevertheless, firms continue to compete fiercely for these phrases. For the limited number of firms with the requisite budget to win this game, doing so may be a defensible component of their search marketing strategy. But the typical firm would be well advised to reduce the emphasis on these phrases and focus its search program on performing for long-tail queries with intent.
- Performing well for long-tail phrases requires clearly defined marketing goals; competent SEO; and abundant, fresh content that is focused and well-aligned with those goals. Firms that fail in this area are often undone not by poor SEO, but by lack of clear goals in the foundation of their website content.
- Ultimately, law firms must realize that there is no silver bullet for marketing success. Search can be an important source of new business opportunities. But to achieve breakthrough marketing results, firms must employ a broad-based, integrated marketing strategy, one that thoughtfully orchestrates a variety of online and offline marketing tactics to reach target prospects – something which will be the subject of an entirely different study.

# NOTES

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