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Case Study: How One Company's Thought-Leadership Content Is Driving New Business, Exposure

by Kimberly Smith

PRO Case Study

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Company: Roberts & Durkee, P.A.
Contact: C. David Durkee, Partner
Location: Coral Gables, Fla.
Industry: Law
Annual revenue: Confidential
Number of employees: Confidential



Quick Read

In June, The Wall Street Journal reported a surge in social-media use by law firms interested in connecting with potential class-action plaintiffs. But if you take a closer look, you'll see that many of the approaches used represent viable marketing lessons for businesses of all types.

Take, for example, the case of Roberts & Durkee, P.A., a Florida-based firm. It has effectively created widespread public awareness around the problem of toxic Chinese drywall and has assisted affected homeowners on multiple levels while generating valuable exposure for

the firm and facilitating relations with potential clients.

Not all businesses can easily link their marketing efforts to this particular problem, but the firm's strategy, along with the individual tactics pursued, offer some best-practices for launching a well-trafficked corporate blog and establishing yourself as a trusted authority in the marketplace.

Challenge

The United States began importing drywall from China in 2001 because of supply shortages during the housing boom. The product looked normal but let off foul, toxic emissions that may have caused myriad health problems among those whose dwellings used the drywall.

Following a series of hurricanes in 2004 and 2005, including Hurricane Katrina, massive rebuilding efforts in the Gulf states led to a high concentration of contaminated homes in the region, where warm, humid temperatures only worsen the issue.

Residents, many of whom poured their life savings into these homes, started suffering respiratory problems, headaches, and other afflictions. For some, household appliances began breaking down, and their silverware turned black.

When the source of the problem was pinpointed, residents learned that the only remedy is to completely gut their homes—a costly and time-consuming process that insurance companies are reluctant to cover.

Many of those homeowners were quickly overwhelmed, with few ready answers as to how to proceed or where to turn for help.

Attorney C. David Durkee, a partner at Roberts & Durkee, was intent on helping, but he also knew this would be no ordinary civil-litigation suit.

"This is mass litigation involving people with very acute needs that cannot be addressed by a plodding court system," he said. "I knew this would require advocacy outside of the courtroom and have much more far-reaching effects than what we normally do.

"This situation involves families living in toxic environments, and we were going to have to try to advocate and clarify certain laws as far as tax codes, property tax codes, building codes, even whether people would be able to keep their insurance. We knew from the start it would be a long, hard fight."

Step 1 was being able to communicate with the public in mass volume, Durkee said. "We have a very specific, very educated group of people who are going through the biggest crises of their lives, all with the same needs, all needing the same information... and I needed to be able to get that information out in public very quickly.

"In the old days, if we wanted to accomplish that, we would have had to go to the media and hope somebody listened, hope that that message would get out there," Durkee explained.

But Jolie Balido-Hart and Jacques Hart of Roar Media, a Miami-based digitally minded public-relations (PR) firm, let Durkee in on a not-so-little secret: In today's day and age, there is a quicker, better way of informing the masses.

Campaign

Led by Roar Media, Durkee's communication strategy involved launching an informational blog and resource website. The following five-step plan helped make the campaign a success.

Step 1: Be quick to market

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In spring 2009, when the connection between Chinese drywall and public health issues was becoming apparent, Durkee wasted no time in devising a plan and registering the campaign URL: www.chinesedrywallproblem.com.

"If you feel you're an expert in the area, don't spend three years figuring it out," Hart advises. "Buy your URL, plant yourself, and start moving forward."

Step 2: Generously offer relevant information of value first and foremost

Both the blog and resource site are designed to be content rich, with useful information that benefits all affected parties, not just the firm's clients.

Content is in English and Spanish, and includes an overview of the issue and historical information, current and breaking news, a current assessment of the situation facing homeowners, and details of their legal rights.

To stay abreast of any new announcements or trends, Roar Media set up Google alerts for 50 Chinese drywall-related terms, all of which are directed to a shared RSS reader so that both Durkee and the Roar Media team can quickly collaborate and post new information as soon as it's available.

For example, one of Durkee's blog posts covered an important IRS clarification regarding tax deductions for losses sustained because of the crisis and included a scanned image of the letter from Florida Senator Bill Nelson that affected parties should take with them when discussing the issue with their accountants.

"It is proof of that authority, not just Durkee told me," Durkee explained. "We were able to get it online and make it available to everyone for free almost immediately."

For business purposes, a contact form was conveniently placed in the left margin for visitors who have additional questions or are interested in acquiring legal representation based on the information provided.

Step 3: Work with the press

Roar Media embarked on a full traditional PR campaign, raising awareness for the issue in general, as well as for Durkee, his firm, and the newly launched blog and site.

The comprehensive information offered via the blog and site help to position Durkee as a credible go-to source for information on the issue. Plus, the more coverage he receives, the more credibility the firm gains.

"Credibility is important for building trust with visitors, and the media coverage we received went a long way in providing that," Durkee said.

Durkee makes himself available for all media interviews, no matter how last-minute. He also works with Roar Media to ensure his media presentations resonate with the general public and not become weighed down with jargon that could cause people to tune out.

Step 4: Focus on SEO

Search engines are often the first place people turn to when seeking information on a major issue, so both paid-search advertising and search-engine optimization (SEO) were employed, with SEO eventually replacing paid search once the site's natural ranking started to rise.

SEO has gone beyond incorporating commonly searched terms into the site's content. For example, Roar Media uploads all media coverage featuring Durkee to the site so that those stories will continue to be accessible if the media outlets later remove them from their own sites.

It also optimizes any video clips by including popular terms in the associated meta and description tags. Metadata for each page, such as the URL strings on top and all H1 and H2 tags, is similarly optimized.

Moreover, the company reaches out to the media to request that Durkee's resource site be linked within their stories, thereby collecting quality links that help boost the site's natural rankings.

"On-page optimization accounts for about 10% of a good SEO program. The rest is link popularity and link building," Hart explained.

Step 5: Use social-networking tools to spread the message further

Durkee also uses his personal Twitter account and a campaign Facebook page to draw attention to new blog posts and breaking news featured on the site.

Results

Durkee's blog and resource website now consistently rank in the top 10 organic search results for related keywords, and they receive an average of 3,000 to 4,000 monthly unique visitors—who, for the most part, hang out and read the information posted rather than quickly clicking off, indicating that the appropriate market is being reached.

Since the launch, affected homeowners have reached out to the firm in droves, resulting in more than 150 new cases to date.

"We probably get about 50% of our leads through the blog and website," said Durkee. "[These properties] are very important in helping people get in contact with me."

These efforts have also helped the firm and the Chinese-drywall issue in general gather more press attention. TIME magazine, ABC World News, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press, and CNN's Lou Dobbs, among others, have featured or quoted Durkee in their coverage of the issue.

"[The blog and website] allow existing media to find this information and get it even more publicized," Durkee said.

Above all, this level of coverage has helped Durkee's firm and the victims of the crisis make important strides.

For example, when Citizens Insurance—the last resort for homeowners who are denied coverage by private insurance companies—announced it would no longer renew coverage for contaminated Florida homes, the blog was immediately updated with a story of how one homeowner was being canceled with nowhere else to go—a situation that would likely lead him to lose his home since a lack of insurance would violate his mortgage policy.

The story was picked up by several media outlets that encouraged their audiences to call on the state's governor and other key contacts to act. Within the month, Citizens Insurance altered its entire policy for the state of Florida, enabling affected homeowners to renew their insurance.

"It was one of my proudest moments," Durkee recalled. "Without even walking into a courtroom, we created a huge change for these victims, who otherwise would have been forced into foreclosure. It is true testament to the power of how a blog can be utilized."

Lessons Learned

A thoughtful blog can bestow thought leadership. Follow Durkee's lead and impart useful knowledge to position yourself as a credible source for potential clients, the media, and anyone else looking for a good spokesperson.

Don't forget to keep that content current with regular updates so that people continue to use it as a trusted resource. Also, put some effort into optimizing that content, and the site it's posted on, for search visibility.

Blogging can save you time. Durkee found that by providing all this information in one place that was easily accessible to all, he could answer many people's queries at once.

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Many clients became accustomed to checking the blog first when they had a question, which enabled Durkee to spend more time focusing on the cases themselves and allowed clients to gather what they needed whenever it was most convenient for them.

Moreover, as more content was added and optimized, the site's natural search rankings rose, which helped to steer new clients and publicity in Durkee's direction without additional PR or ad spend.

Content rules. Good content drives inbound links, site traffic, and views, all of which boost natural search rankings, which increases traffic, which... you get the idea. It's a synergistic cycle that begins with the quality of the content you put out there. So make it good.

Related Links

- Campaign website: <http://www.chinesedrywallproblem.com/>
- Campaign blog: <http://www.chinesedrywallproblem.com/category/blog/>
- Roberts & Durkee, P.A. website: <http://www.rdlawnet.com/>
- Roar Media website: <http://www.roarmedia.com>

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