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Coffee Doesn't Scale! How Lawyers Can Use Digital Marketing to Win New Clients

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1 INTRODUCTION

Simmonds Stewart started life as a small Wellington law firm with a mix of Government and tech sector clients built up mostly through personal connections, networking and word-of-mouth referrals. The firm's website was hard to find unless searching for "Simmonds Stewart" or for one of our lawyers by name. The number of clients who found us exclusively via a Google search in the first 6 years could be counted on the fingers of one hand.

In 2012, as a consequence of changes in Government procurement policy, the firm decided to rebrand as a technology law firm and to open an office in Auckland. While we had a network in Auckland, we realised that we weren't going to grow our client base quickly enough if we continued our traditional approach to business development. Networking and hitting up contacts over coffee was winning us new clients, but this style of "one on one" marketing was inherently limited because there are only so many meetings that our lawyers could have each day.

For a small firm needing to crack a new market, coffee meetings were simply not a scalable model. Instead, we made "coffee doesn't scale" our mantra and concentrated our resources on making the internet our primary marketing and business development tool.

Fast forward to 2016, and this strategy has been pretty successful:

- more than 20% of our new clients find us solely via a Google search using phrases such as "technology lawyers", "venture capital lawyers", "capital raising lawyers", "IT lawyers" and "startup lawyers";
- the majority of our new clients have been significantly influenced in their choice of lawyer by our web marketing;
- our word-of-mouth referral network has grown exponentially; and
- our website receives more traffic than any other New Zealand law firm site, from both visitors in New Zealand and internationally (measured by Alexa Rank).

We achieved all of this with a modest web design and development budget, spending no money on digital marketing or SEO (search engine optimisation) consultants. Our limited budget was a blessing because it forced us to learn a lot

about digital marketing ourselves. While our “all or nothing” strategy was very ambitious, we think most law firms can improve their rate and cost of client acquisition by including digital marketing in their business development plan. This paper is intended to get lawyers thinking about how they can do this.

2 WHAT EXACTLY IS DIGITAL MARKETING?

At its simplest, digital marketing is using the internet and email to generate sales leads for your business.

There are two main types of digital marketing:

- Inbound marketing – bringing visitors to your website to generate new business leads. Particularly doing things that give you high search rankings for your core service offerings, to help potential customers to find your site on Google easily; and
- Outbound marketing – email and other direct messaging campaigns where you market your firm directly to contact lists.

There is a lot of debate on the web about which form of marketing is most important. For complex services like law, inbound marketing is effective because people are always looking for specialist content on the internet that lawyers can publish to hook people onto their site. Inbound marketing has been very successful for us and we have not done any outbound campaigns so far (our email newsletters are designed to bring people to our site to access the content there). However, we think outbound could be effective if done well.

3 WHY SHOULD LAWYERS CARE ABOUT IT?

The hardest part about private practice is winning new clients. As a consequence, lawyers who are good at business development tend to have the highest value to a firm, and this status has all sorts of benefits including those of a financial nature.

So if digital marketing can win new clients for you more efficiently than your current methods of business development, it is obviously something you should think about doing to enhance your career/firm/bank balance.

There are also strategic considerations:

- Digital marketing can help firms build a brand that exists independently from

the brands of the individual partners of the firm. This is particularly important to smaller and boutique firms who are vulnerable to partnership changes; and

- Traditional law firms will increasingly face competition from legal businesses with online engagement and/or online delivery models. One of the big opportunities for these online businesses is that they are digital marketing natives, and can claim territory on Google with little competition. Traditional law firms stand to lose significant volumes of potential customers if they get squeezed off the first page of relevant Google search results by these new competitors.

4 IT SOUNDS HARD – HOW DO I GET STARTED?

The good news is that for professional services firms in a small market like New Zealand, inbound marketing is easy to get started with.

At its most basic, you can start getting results by:

- Deciding on a bunch of keywords (say 10) that you think potential customers will use when searching for the types of services that you provide. In our case, these are word combinations like “technology lawyers” and “venture capital lawyers”; and
- Adding a blog section to your website, and blogging on topics that include those keywords. Promote those blogs in your newsletters and on relevant social media (we use Twitter and LinkedIn, but for some lawyers Facebook may be more relevant).

Hey presto. Google will start indexing your new content, and over time will start to present your blogs in search results when people in your geography search using your keywords. The more that people click on your content in the search results, the higher up the search rankings you go. And the more content you have that Google thinks is interesting, the better ranking Google will give your site for search results generally. The more people who click on your blogs and read your content, the more people will call you for help with work relevant to the content you publish.

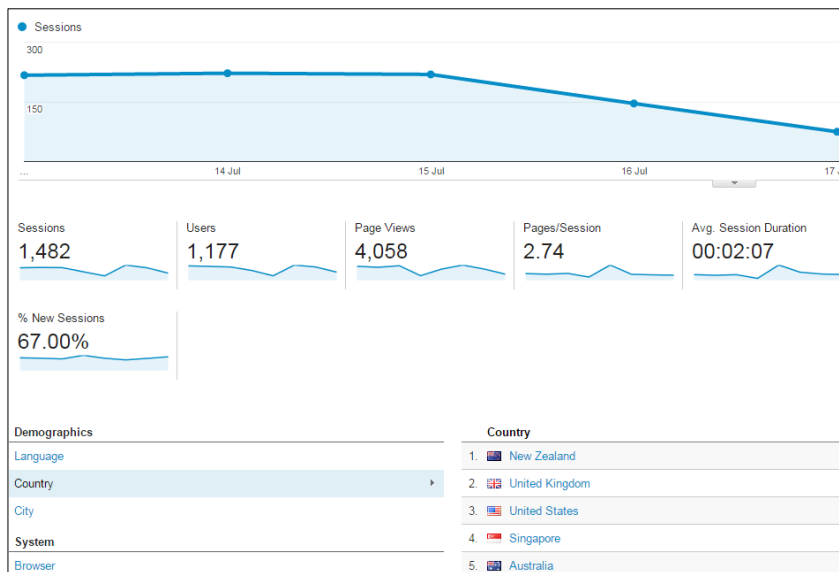
For blogs, you can substitute any type of original content. It could be white papers, guides, checklists or templates for download. The key is for it to be relevant to the keywords you are targeting.

Although this simple approach will get results, it will be hard for you to measure them. Without measurement, it is hard to assess the return on your investment and you are missing out on one of the best features of digital marketing and inbound marketing. By measuring your results, you can make continual adjustments to improve your performance.

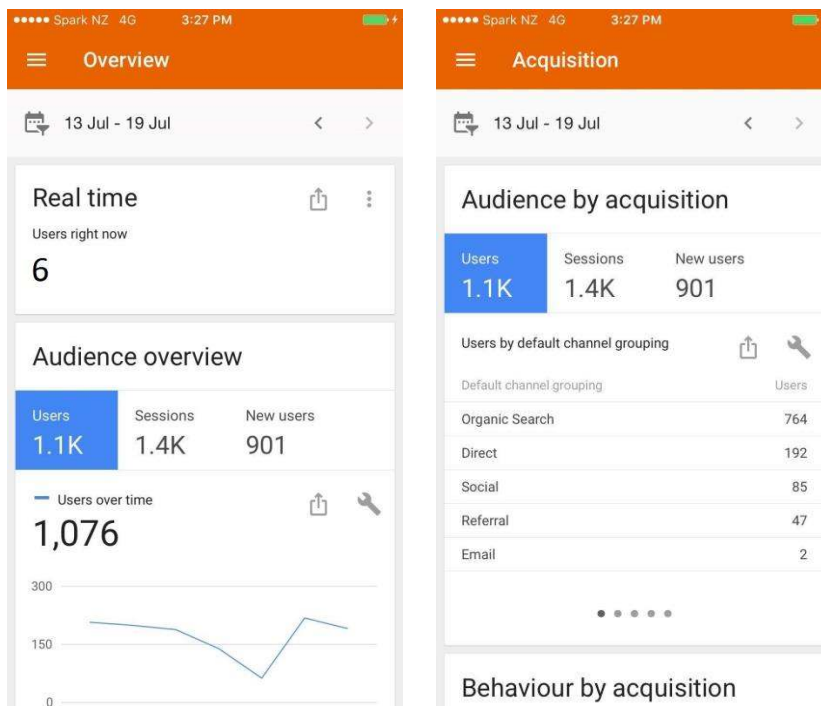
For this reason, for those who are new to digital marketing, we suggest an approach along the following lines:

- Research how your site is currently performing on Google searches for all of your keywords, and variations of those keywords. For example, on www.google.co.nz, we would check out “technology lawyers nz”, “technology lawyers auckland”, “technology lawyers wellington” and all of those regional variants for “tech lawyers”, “tech lawyer”, “technology law firm” and “tech law firm”. There will usually be variations between those terms, and regional variances can be quite significant depending on where your firm is based and the strength of the competition in each region; and
- Set up a Google Analytics account, and have your web developer install the Google tracking code on your site. Run this for a month or two, so that you can get a baseline of basic statistics such as how many visitors you get per day, where they are coming from (search, links, social media, direct), average time on the site, and what content they read. As well as the desktop version of Google Analytics, we use an iPhone app called Dashboard for Google Analytics, which has handy summaries of the (at times overwhelming) array of data Google generates, including real time information about visitors to your site.

Google Analytics Dashboard



Google Analytics mobile app Dashboard



- Because you will want to keep checking how you are tracking on those keywords, you will want to sign up to one of the SEO tracking/keyword sites. We initially used www.moz.com, which is a great resource and gives good insights into your competitors' keyword performance. However, it is expensive and we now use www.positiononly.com. With these sites, you can load up your keywords and variants and track how you are doing on a daily basis. You can also compare how your competitors are doing on the same keywords.

Positionally keyword analysis








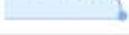
Keywords (26)

+ Add keywords

<input type="checkbox"/> KEYWORD	⚙️	RANKING (CHANGE)	COMPETITION
<input type="checkbox"/> capital raising lawyers nz		1	Medium
<input type="checkbox"/> shareholders agreement template nz		1	Low
<input type="checkbox"/> startup lawyer nz		1	Medium
<input type="checkbox"/> tech law firm nz		1	High
<input type="checkbox"/> technology law firm nz		1	Medium
<input type="checkbox"/> vc lawyers nz		1	High
<input type="checkbox"/> venture capital lawyers nz		1	Medium

- Check out your Alexa Rank, and the Alexa Rank of your competitors. This is a measure of the popularity of your website, primarily (we think) by traffic numbers. You can do this for free on www.alexa.com, but you will only see a global ranking. If you subscribe to Alexa, you can install a tracking code to measure your traffic more precisely and this will also give you a NZ ranking and more detailed information about your traffic and the traffic of your competitors. At the time of writing, www.simmondsstewart.com had a global Alexa Rank of 840,631 and a NZ rank of 3,960, with the next NZ law firm that we have identified being Chapman Tripp with a global rank of 1,824,305 and a NZ rank of 9,524.

Alexa ranking competitor analysis

Site	3 mo. Trend	Global Rank
simmondsstewart...		840,631
chapmantripp.com		1,824,305
minterellison.co.nz		3,652,507
bellgully.com		4,074,758
russellmcveagh.co...		3,001,264
dlapiper.co.nz		5,504,234
simpsongrierson.c...		4,122,203
buddlefindlay.com		6,251,987

- Undertake some basic SEO work on your site with your web developer. See section 5 below for our suggestions on SEO.
- Start publishing and promoting your new content. Watch carefully what happens on Google Analytics and to your keyword results when you publish and promote new content. For example, there are good and bad times of the day/night to publish content depending on your audience, and you will learn this from experience.
- Keep publishing new content, all the while making incremental improvements to your site, content and promotional techniques, based on what you learn from studying your metrics.
- Read up-to-date blogs and books on inbound marketing. We've listed some of the resources we like in section 10 below. Bear in mind that Google is continually refining its search algorithms, and makes major changes every couple of years that can dramatically change SEO practice, so take care reading any material that is more than 18 months old.

5 SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION (SEO)

SEO is about optimising your site to improve its performance in Google searches. It is particularly focussed on achieving good results in Google searches for the

keywords (and related words and phrases) that you have chosen to target.

Because the web is increasingly a mission-critical marketing and sales channel for both consumer and b2b (business-to-business) businesses, SEO has become a significant new consultancy field. SEO consultants typically seek engagement on monthly retainers with the goal of achieving steady increases in the Google ranking of their clients' sites. This can be an expensive exercise however, as on top of the SEO retainer you will still need to pay a web developer to make tweaks to your site to improve its performance and for any AdWords campaigns that your consultant thinks are needed.

Although you will get results from spending on SEO consultants, we don't think it is the best place to start as it will stop you from learning the basics yourself.

Your first port of call should be your web developer. Your developer should cover the "mechanical" basics – such as page titles, matching URLs and meta tags to the extent they are important – in the set-up of your site. Popular web publishing platforms like WordPress now make this child's play.

The next thing is to get one or two of your tech/social media-savvy lawyers to read up on SEO basics. It's a fascinating area once you get into it. A good place to start is Moz.com's "Beginner's Guide to SEO". It's also handy if you have web developer or IT friends whom you can chat to – and this is a perfect chance to make a karmic recovery on all that free advice you've given over coffee to your friends and contacts.

Finally, your new SEO expert can use this knowledge to suggest to the web developer incremental improvements to your website. This is the same as tuning your content to improve your keyword performance (which in reality is the first step of any SEO process).

Don't worry about getting it wrong. SEO mistakes are inevitable, and unless you are running a high-traffic site (and by definition professional services sites are not high traffic) they don't really matter that much. The key thing is to make continuing incremental improvements and to back out changes that have a negative impact on your site's search performance.

It is definitely possible to get good search rankings this way, without spending on SEO consultancy (which we've been able to prove with our own site).

These are some of the things we found made a difference to our search results (some of which are incredibly simple, but which had not occurred to us or our web designers):

- Your home page is the most important page of your site. You want Google to find this page as easily as possible. Making your home page attractive to Google is much more important than how nice it looks to visitors;
- It is important to have a concise title on your home page that describes your firm, ideally using keywords that people are likely to use when searching for the types of services your firm provides. This is easiest for specialist firms, not so easy for full service firms. Even though we are very specialised, we still managed to confuse Google with our initial title of “Technology and Venture Lawyers”. Since we changed the title on our home page to “Technology Lawyers”, our rankings for that term and variants of that term have improved;
- The more specific you can be about your location on your home page, the more Google rewards you in search phrases using that location. For example, our site was ranking well for “technology lawyers new zealand” but was invisible for “technology lawyers wellington” and “technology lawyers auckland”. Once we noticed this, we added reference to Auckland and Wellington on our home page, and our search results quickly improved. We think this is an obvious opportunity for regional law firms;
- Try to use the most common words relevant to a practice area you are trying to promote, even if this isn’t perfect from a definitional point of view. For example, we initially avoided the term “start-ups” and used “high growth companies” and “emerging companies” instead. We thought our terms were more accurate to describe the types of company we worked with, but they weren’t the terms for which people were searching. Google punished us for our independent thinking by giving us poor rankings for start-up related terms until we capitulated and changed our site; and
- While it is nice to have a visually appealing site, generally speaking Google favours content over aesthetics. What we have learned is that it is better to have more words on a page and to hit the keywords that you think potential clients will search, at the expense of how nice the site looks. Bear in mind here that web designers are rather like architects in this regard – they can be

more concerned with aesthetics than buildability/liveability. It is definitely better to have an average-looking site that gets good search rankings, than a beautiful site that only your parents visit.

6 GOOGLE ADWORDS

So far we have focussed on how to bring visitors to your website by improving your Google search rankings, without any paid advertising. This is often referred to as “organic search”.

Google AdWords is the other main way to bring visitors to your site from Google searches. AdWords works by placing paid advertisements on the search results page close to Google’s “organic” search results.

AdWords enables advertisers to display custom advertisements in response to targeted keywords, with links back to the advertiser’s site. Advertisers are able to target Google search users by geography (essential for NZ lawyers as there is no point advertising in countries that you can’t service) and many other criteria. Placement of advertisements is dependent on many factors, the most important of which are the price you are willing to pay for each visitor delivered to your site (the “cost per click”) and what Google determines is the relevance of your advertisement to each search.

We haven’t made much use of AdWords, but we have met a number of New Zealand lawyers who do and who have found it relatively easy to generate new client leads through this method. It seems to us that AdWords are likely to be most effective for lawyers servicing consumers and small businesses. However, we’re happy to be proved wrong on that.

What we have learned from our brief forays into the AdWords system is that it is as complicated as it is powerful. Unless we wanted to undertake some relatively simple advertising, we would probably engage an expert to assist us to get set up and with management of our campaigns.

7 SOCIAL MEDIA

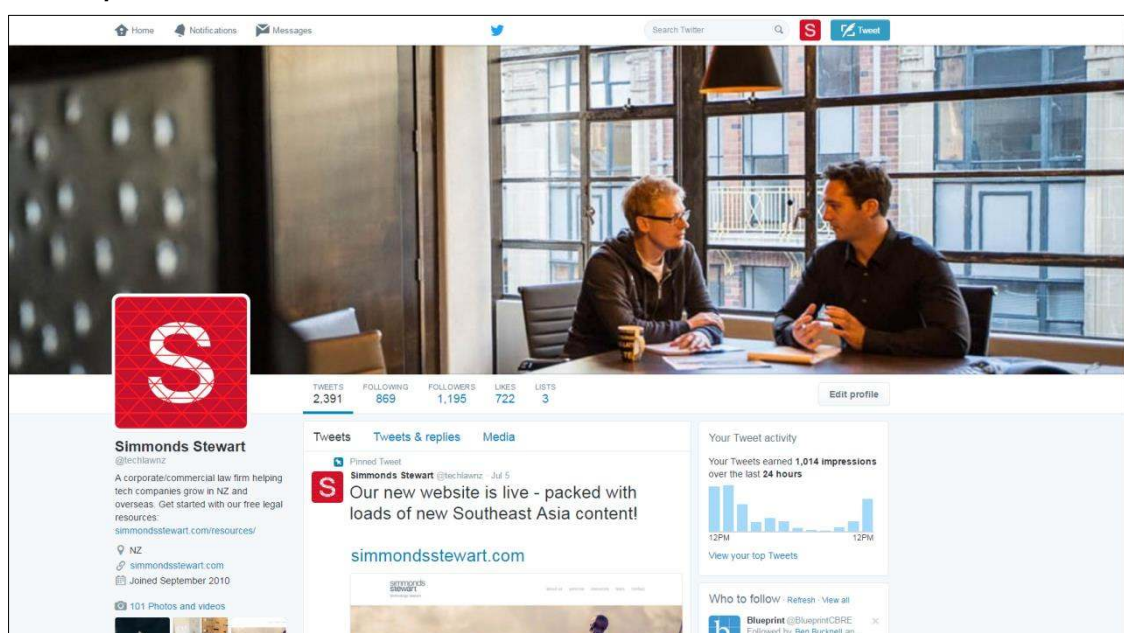
Social media is a great (and pretty much free) way to promote your content to relevant audiences, with the goal of increasing the number of visitors you get to your site. Although your site’s search rankings will improve over time just through publishing good, relevant content, they will grow much faster if you can build

interest in your content on social media.

Which social media you use will depend on the market you are targeting. We put most of our effort into Twitter, as this is widely used and followed in the tech sector. We also put some effort into LinkedIn and more recently Facebook.

Our social media strategy is to promote our firm and the content on our website, rather than to promote individual lawyers. While all of our lawyers have Twitter and LinkedIn accounts, the goal for us is to drive interest in the firm as a whole. However, that is just our strategy – other NZ lawyers have had a lot of success building personal brands on Twitter for example.

Twitter profile



8 OUTBOUND MARKETING (EMAIL)

Sending an email newsletter to clients is the one of the earliest forms of digital marketing, and it is still pretty popular. Many law firms send (ir)regular newsletters, some to all clients and some segmented by practice area.

Oddly enough, we didn't bother with client newsletters until about a couple of years ago. Our focus was on reaching a new audience of potential new clients, so we put all of our energy into building our web content and promoting that via social media and online publications.

Once we started with a newsletter, we realised that we had been missing an opportunity to promote our content to an audience that was already interested in what we are doing. What we now find is that the day we send our newsletter is

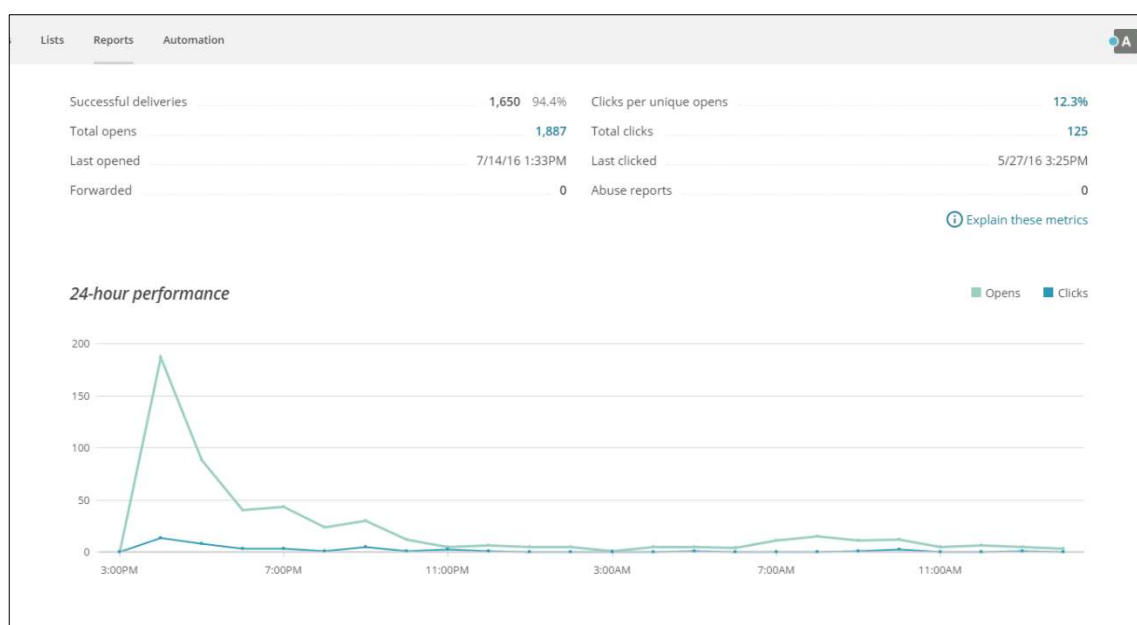
usually the biggest web traffic day for the month. More traffic, particularly more engaged traffic, improves your Google rankings (even if this is only an indirect result).

Of course, it is possible to use email to market to new audiences. This involves acquiring email databases of relevant audiences, and crafting a direct marketing campaign to bring users to your site (usually to a landing page with a special offer of some description). We are not aware of any lawyers using this technique, and certainly we have been squeamish about trying it because of the negative brand impression email marketing spam often creates. However, this type of marketing does work (it is a big business in its own right) and we would be interested to see it in action.

We use MailChimp to manage our newsletter emails. The MailChimp platform provides fantastic data on the level of engagement with our emails (statistics include “opened”, “read” and “clicks”, as well as “unsubscribes”). It also provides longitudinal data across campaigns and individual list members. This data helps us as we try to tune our newsletters to get better results each month.

There are lots of similar email platforms available. However, MailChimp’s focus on protecting people from unwanted spam (including making it extremely easy to unsubscribe from a list), its ease of use and low cost seem to have made it the most chosen platform in the tech sector at least.

MailChimp dashboard



WHAT IT COSTS

Building a simple informational/brochure site with the ability to post blogs and upload some content does not cost a great deal in 2016. Even when you factor in the costs of a web designer (who “draws” the site for your developer to build) and photography, you should be able to get a good site built for less than a good staff Christmas party.

We think the most important thing is to choose a developer who is going to be able to work with you cost-effectively once the site is up and running to help you make iterative keyword- and SEO-driven tweaks to your site. For us, this pointed towards working with a small development shop that valued our small but regular monthly work orders.

We’ve built three sites since we started our firm 10 years ago, and our last site had two major revisions including adding basic e-commerce functionality so that lawyers could pay to download our technology company legal templates. In total, across all of this work, we’ve spent less than \$120k on developers, designers, and imagery (photography and graphic art). The return on that investment is far greater than we could have achieved with any other form of marketing or business development expense.

10 RESOURCES

Moz's Beginner's Guide to SEO: <https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo>

MailChimp's Small Business Guide:

<http://mailchimp.com/resources/guides/mailchimp-for-small-business/>

Hootsuite's Twitter Marketing Resources:

<https://blog.hootsuite.com/topic/twitter-marketing/>

Google's AdWords Guide:

https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en/nz/adwords/pdf/step_by_step.pdf

Moz's Beginners Guide to Google Analytics:

<https://moz.com/blog/absolute-beginners-guide-to-google-analytics>