



**THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19
ON THE
LEGAL
SECTOR**



ABOUT CONNECTIVE3

connective3 is a digital marketing agency and we create market leaders. We do this through the application of SEO, Content Strategy, Digital PR, PPC, Display, Social Media and CRO to drive growth focussed performance.

Founded in October 2019 by CEO Tim Grice, we've grown to a team of over 80 marketers across offices in Leeds, London and Manchester. Headquartered in the UK we work with clients globally and deliver transformational results to help them dominate in their sectors.

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INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus was declared a public health emergency of international concern by the World Health Organisation on 30 January 2020. Not only have governments, and particularly healthcare systems, had to respond swiftly to mitigate the risks and ensure the wellbeing of their citizens, COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on work practices across every industry – and law is no exception.

The pandemic has forced entire firms to work from home, turbocharged technology adoption across the sector, impacted client demand and forced firms to put their prices up. Although, after a year and a half, the legal community has embraced many of these pandemic-driven changes, some haven't fared so well in the face of such rapid and distinct changes.

To delve deeper into the impact COVID-19 has had on the legal sector, we take a look at how smaller law firms have coped relative to larger firms in the UK market. To do this, we have analysed the visibility and organic traffic of the top 10 and bottom 10 UK law firms, comparing performance in 2018 (pre-pandemic), 2020 (during) and 2022 (post-pandemic).

“Most people are aware of how detrimental the Covid-19 pandemic has been to so many industries across the UK, but the legal sector, despite being one of the hardest-hit, is often overlooked. Conducting this research, I was able to highlight, not only how the legal climate has changed as a result of the pandemic, but also the disparities it has caused amongst larger law firms that were already performing well and smaller law firms that weren't quite as established before we were hit.”

“What I found most interesting about this research was the extent to which the pandemic affected smaller law firms compared to larger ones. While I did expect smaller firms to have been slightly slower to adapt, it was surprising to see just how significant their drop in performance was from pre- to post-Covid.”

CHLOE ROBINSON, SENIOR CONTENT WRITER



Having worked in both SEO and content writing roles, Chloe has over 3 years of experience optimising websites across a wide range of industries. As a senior content writer at connective3, Chloe takes pride in delivering SEO-focused content strategies and creating engaging content that will increase visibility, drive organic traffic and lead to conversions.

HOW COVID-19 HAS CHANGED THE LEGAL SECTOR

Thankfully, it looks like we're coming out the other end of the COVID-19 pandemic. And, whilst this is great news, it doesn't necessarily mean the end to the issues that have arisen in the legal sphere as a result of it. So, how has the coronavirus pandemic impacted the legal sector as a whole?

REMOTE WORK

One of the most significant results of the pandemic, which influenced nearly all sectors, is the switch to fully remote work. Along with almost every other profession, lawyers were forced to pack up their offices and move work into their homes. With this change, lawyers had to adjust to video meetings with clients and work with co-workers on projects without the ease of being in the same office.

It will be interesting to see how this drastic change to working life affected the law sector – whether for better or for worse. Will larger law firms have slipped with such large teams to keep track of? Or will smaller firms have failed to adapt due to a lack of resources?

CLIENT EXPECTATIONS

In addition to a potential post-pandemic surge in demand, UK legal firms are tending to see the legal needs of their clients shift and evolve. According to [Thomson Reuters](#), the main trends and developments during the pandemic (2021) in the UK legal market were strongly client-centric and client-driven. Issues from increased legal spending to what clients want to see from their external firms in terms of expertise, tech-savviness, and efficiency dominated the minds of law firms and their clients.

Since even before the pandemic, the service needs of UK legal buyers were becoming more complex and intertwined. Data from Thomson Reuters also found that client satisfaction rests on the ability of law firms to provide consistency and innovation, which in turn, can provide law firms with opportunities to differentiate themselves in the competitive UK market.

CLIENT DEMAND

During the period of 'lockdown' there were fewer arrests, charges and prosecutions brought by the Crown Court Prosecution Service, trial by jury was paused, and fewer civil cases were started. This reduction in legal activity meant lower client demand and, thus, lower incomes for legal service providers.

With this in mind, we would expect to see a decline in demand for legal services during the pandemic. However, given that many cases were put on hold throughout the pandemic, now that we're starting to emerge from it, we could expect to see a sudden surge in client demand again in 2022.

RISING COSTS

More recently, a slightly lagged impact of the pandemic has been inflation, which has drastically impacted legal firm rates. And inflation ramped up so quickly in the second half of 2021 that many law firms had very little chance to react.

In the past, law firms have predominantly relied on raising their rates each year as key means of improving profits, as opposed to increasing the hours their firm works, on average. With inflation so high, though, worked rate growth currently lags inflation.

This threat of inflation gives law firms plenty of incentive to push their rates up. This will, however, test the willingness of clients to accept such steep rate increases.

HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED DIFFERENT SIZED LAW FIRMS?

To determine how the impact on large law firms has differed to that of smaller law firms, we selected the top and bottom 10 law firms according to [thelawyer.com](https://www.thelawyer.com). We then conducted an analysis into each law firm's SEO performance, including visibility and organic traffic, for the years 2018 (pre-pandemic), 2020 (during) and 2022 (post-pandemic) to determine which fared better over the period of Covid-19.

THE TOP 10 UK LAW FIRMS

Rank	Law Firm	Average Revenue 2015-18 (M£)
1	DLA Piper	1674
2	Clifford Chance	1472
3	Allen & Overy	1430
4	Linklaters	1378
5	Hogan Lovells	1373
6	Freshfields Buckhaus Deringer	1312
7	Norton Rose Fullbright	1204
8	Herbert Smith Freehills	889
9	CMS	840
10	Ashurst	543

THE BOTTOM 10 UK LAW FIRMS

Rank	Law Firm	Average Revenue 2015-18 (M£)
100	Turcan Connell	23
99	Geldards	23
98	Stevens & Bolton	23
97	DMH Stallard	23
96	Boodle Hatfield	24
95	Harper Macleod	25
94	Harbottle & Lewis	25
93	MW Solicitors	26
92	Gordon Dadds	26
91	Sackers	26
90	Digby Brown	26

ORGANIC VISIBILITY

ORGANIC VISIBILITY: TOP 10 UK LAW FIRMS (2018/2020/2022)

Law Firm	Visibility score 2018 (pre-pandemic)	Visibility score 2020 (during pandemic)	Visibility growth % (2018-2020)	Visibility score 2022 (post-pandemic)	Visibility growth % (2020-2022)
DLA Piper	582	1,520	+161	1,226	-19
Clifford Chance	1,180	1,552	+32	2,648	+124
Allen & Overy	884	1,262	+43	979	-22
Linklaters	1,238	1,408	+14	1,515	+8
Hogan Lovells	1,319	1,358	+3	532	-61
Freshfields Buckhaus Deringer	271	518	+91	248	-52
Norton Rose Fullbright	2,392	1,538	-36	814	-47
Herbert Smith Freehills	1,135	1,143	+0.7	1,202	+5
CMS	1,689	1,171	-31	1,674	+43
Ashurst	255	718	+182	1,483	+107

Looking at the visibility change for the top 10 law firms in the UK, it is clear that nearly all but two firms experienced fairly significant growth from pre-pandemic (2018) to during the pandemic (2020). The only two law firms that experienced some slight decline during this period was Norton Rose Fullbright (7) and CMS (9).

However, this visibility trend changed slightly with the onset of the pandemic, with half of the top 10 UK law firms, including the number one ranked (DLA Piper), suffered a loss of visibility from 2020 to 2022. Nevertheless, it is clear that many of these more established law firms managed to fare relatively well throughout the pandemic, with most only seeing their visibility growth slow slightly and others actually continuing to see visibility growth post-pandemic.

This suggests that while some larger law firms failed to maintain the impressive visibility growth seen pre-pandemic, most have managed to at least not see a large drop or have even managed to keep on seeing improvements.

ORGANIC VISIBILITY: BOTTOM 10 UK LAW FIRMS (2018/2020/2022)

Law Firm	Visibility score 2018 (pre pandemic)	Visibility score 2020 (during pandemic)	Visibility growth % (2018-2020)	Visibility score 2022 (post pandemic)	Visibility growth % (2020-2022)
Turcan Connell	295	186	-37	7	-96
Geldards	33	99	+200	23	-76
Stevens & Bolton	81	397	+390	161	-59
DMH Stallard	294	212	-28	264	+25
Boodle Hatfield	179	188	+5	100	-47
Harper Macleod	213	116	-45	118	+2
Harbottle & Lewis	379	276	-27	101	-63
MW Solicitors	387	1,869	+383	1,493	-20
Gordon Dadds	0	154	-	261	+69
Sackers	95	65	-32	29	-55
Digby Brown	1,470	526	-64	579	+10

While some larger law firms have clearly suffered as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, from our analysis, we can see that smaller law firms have been affected even more drastically by the uncontrollable changes that it brought about. Before the pandemic properly took hold, many smaller law firms had seen significant growth in visibility. In particular, Geldards (99), Stevens & Bolton (98), and MW Solicitors (91) all experienced visibility growth that exceed 200% between 2018 and 2020.

With this in mind, it seems the pandemic hit at just the wrong time for many smaller law firms that were just starting to increase their brand awareness online. From the start of the pandemic to the end, over half of smaller law firms analysed saw a decline in organic visibility.

This suggests that Covid-19 put a sudden stop to the growth of many smaller UK law firms, causing some to remain almost stagnant and others to drop significantly. As a result, these less established law firms will struggle to get back up to their pre-pandemic levels of performance and remain competitive against the larger players in the field.

ORGANIC TRAFFIC

ORGANIC TRAFFIC: TOP 10 UK LAW FIRMS (2018/2020/2022)

Law Firm	Organic traffic 2018 (during pandemic)	Organic traffic 2020 (post-pandemic)	Organic traffic growth % (2018-2020)	Organic traffic 2022 (post-pandemic)	Organic traffic growth % (2020-2022)
DLA Piper	1,058	13,903	+1214	6,010	-57
Clifford Chance	10,469	13,310	+27	39,986	+200
Allen & Overy	24,819	28,246	+14	49,692	+76
Linklaters	20,529	26,068	+27	32,785	+26
Hogan Lovells	22,960	27,208	+19	23,493	-14
Freshfields Buckhaus Deringer	20,203	25,620	+27	20,763	-19
Norton Rose Fullbright	0	13,281	-	16,632	+25
Herbert Smith Freehills	20,981	23,544	+12	23,205	+18
CMS	0	20,519	-	27,868	+36
Ashurst	16,535	25,184	+52	35,564	+41

The trend in organic traffic for larger UK law firms is fairly in line with that for visibility. Pre-pandemic, all larger law firms were experiencing significant growth in organic traffic, with DLA Piper (1) seeing the largest increase. For most of the top 10 law firms, this growth, despite largely slowing, continued throughout the pandemic. In fact, 7 out of 10 continued to see organic traffic grow slowly between 2020 and 2022.

This indicates that most larger law firms, despite seeing some impact from the pandemic, have still managed to maintain growth in the face of the changes forced upon them by Covid.

ORGANIC TRAFFIC: BOTTOM 10 UK LAW FIRMS (2018/2020/2022)

Law Firm	Organic traffic 2018 (during pandemic)	Organic traffic 2020 (post-pandemic)	Organic traffic growth % (2018-2020)	Organic traffic 2022 (post-pandemic)	Organic traffic growth % (2020-2022)
Turcan Connell	3,921	2,883	-26	1,925	-33
Geldards	3,821	5,562	+46	2,354	-58
Stevens & Bolton	2,643	6,405	+142	6,905	+8
DMH Stallard	4,981	5,120	+3	6,051	+18
Boodle Hatfield	4,238	5,182	+22	2,237	-57
Harper Macleod	6,910	8,335	+20	9,348	+12
Harbottle & Lewis	3,849	4,989	+29	3,688	-26
MW Solicitors	0	5	-	191	+3720
Gordon Dadds	0	1,839	-	9,364	+409
Sackers	1,944	1,186	-39	1,187	+0.08
Digby Brown	7,729	7,527	-3	7,986	+6

Like with the more established law firms, most smaller law firms were also seeing improvements in organic traffic pre-pandemic, with 8 out of 10 experiencing growth. Yet, this growth was much smaller than that seen for the larger law firms before the pandemic hit in 2020.

Unlike the larger law firms, however, organic traffic growth post-pandemic has been much slower for smaller law firms, with some continuing to experience a decline in traffic to their websites.

This suggests that, as with visibility, smaller UK law firms have failed to recover from the impacts of the pandemic as well as larger UK law firms have, struggling to attract potential clients to their websites.

WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN?

Overall, the results from our analysis of visibility and organic traffic performance of the top 10 and bottom 10 law firms in the UK suggest that larger law firms have been more successful in their recovery from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite both the larger and smaller law firms both experiencing some visibility and traffic growth prior to the pandemic hitting, the smaller firms failed to maintain or improve this growth during and after the pandemic. By contrast, many larger firms were able to keep their visibility and traffic levels stable, while some even experienced some growth during the pandemic. This indicates that not only were larger UK law firms able to cope with the sudden changes brought about by the pandemic, but that they have fully evolved how they work and market to maintain or continue this growth post-pandemic.

Perhaps this is a sign that larger law firms are simply able to throw more resources at the problem and come out the other side comparatively unscathed. Whether it's marketing, training, or recruitment resources, these will have all made a massive difference in maintaining or growing their brand presence online and attracting more people to their websites.

WHAT CAN SMALLER LAW FIRMS DO TO REMAIN COMPETITIVE POST-COVID?

So, with this in mind, what can smaller law firms do to keep up with the big players in this evolved post-covid climate?

At first glance, the legal sector doesn't seem like the standard bearer for change and innovation. After all, the go-to marketing strategies and business models of most UK law firms have remained static for over half a century.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic has turned these traditional marketing tactics on their head. Today, in this post-covid legal world, clients have more choice than ever before, so legal firms, and especially smaller, less established legal firms, must do more to stand out from the crowd and articulate their competitive advantage to potential clients.

Perhaps once seemingly unnecessary in a sector that just kept on growing, digital marketing is now becoming widely recognised as essential to navigating a changing future for law firms. In fact, according to a [2018 Legal Marketing Association \(LMA\) report](#), over 60% of law firms are increasing their focus on marketing and business development.

This fact contributed to 41% of law firms stating that acquiring or increasing marketing staff was a top investment.

A sound SEO strategy can work to boost smaller law firms' brand awareness online by improving organic visibility. In turn, driving more traffic to law firm websites and converting more potential clients. As a result, smaller law firms will be placed in a better position to levy their resources and adapt to the changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, mitigating issues like remote work, recruitment, client expectations and rising costs.

For further information on the data presented above or to hear more about our [SEO](#), [content strategy](#), and [content marketing](#) services, feel free to [contact us](#) directly.

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your legal marketing:

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