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Social Media Networking For lawyers: A Practical Guide to Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Blogging

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By Simon Chester and Daniel Del Gobbo

About the Author

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What a difference five years makes. Social media has exploded. Over 800 million people now connect with each other using Facebook—more than one-half on a daily basis. And hundreds of millions more connect using other social networking websites like LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube, just to name a few. News feeds report stories live in real time. Blogs are often the fastest and best source for cutting-edge legal commentary.

And the tools are constantly evolving. Smartphones and tablets (such as iPads) allow people to access online content and post updates 24/7 from anywhere they have a wireless or cell connection. The rise of social media has fundamentally changed how we all communicate in both our personal and professional worlds.

Younger people today have grown up with technology all around them, and it is intertwined in every aspect of their lives. Nearly all the younger lawyers at your firm will have Facebook profiles they check daily, many will have already uploaded their résumés on LinkedIn and some may tweet links to online content of some sort. And social media is not the exclusive preserve of the young.

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Networking sites are seeing a spike in adult membership, including senior lawyers.

How are law firms approaching social media? Just two short years ago, the appropriate law firm response to social media was still being debated. Like any other change in law firm policy or operations, getting to consensus was painful. It's no secret: Lawyers don't like change.

At the outset, firm management simply didn't know what to make of these tools. IT professionals expressed concern over security lapses and breaches of confidentiality. Marketing directors feared that firm image would be compromised by the improper use of the firm's logo or imprudent 25-year-olds engaged in flame wars. HR people assumed staff would go online and waste valuable work time.

The typical response: Access to MySpace, Facebook and instant messaging was routinely blocked. Blogs were viewed with suspicion. Few firms saw the need to develop coherent social media policies to guide the use of these new-fangled communication tools, let alone to encourage experimentation or allow staff to use them.

But times have changed. Given the trends noted above, engagement with social media has become a functional imperative for all law firms. Lawyers are beginning to realize the potential of social media to market their services, build connections with other lawyers and potential clients, or gather and share information about the law and practice. So the question now is not whether law firms can engage with social media, but how? Creating a policy that gives law firm lawyers and staff clear direction on what they can and can't do is essential.

The morass of social media services may seem bewildering— there are thousands of them—but with a bit of research and guidance you can sort out which ones have the potential to do something for you and your firm.

Here is a quick overview of the four main social media tools you should consider using: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs. In the pages following this article, four lawyers that actively use these tools share their advice for making the most of them.

FACEBOOK

Facebook is becoming the social and communications hub for all aspects of the lives of millions of people. They use it to share information with friends and work colleagues, and it is their preferred means of communication. For many, Facebook's private message feature is replacing email.

As the largest social networking site on the Web, Facebook poses opportunities and challenges for lawyers and law firms. Any place

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where you can meet 800 million unique people is clearly a lucrative marketing opportunity. And while initially, most people saw Facebook as a personal networking tool, it is being used increasingly as a successful business marketing tool as well.

But herein lies the challenge many lawyers will face when they consider using Facebook. Links to interesting cases or wall posts to potential clients shouldn't be sullied by nearby photos of your sister-in-law's bachelorette party in Vegas.

Confidentiality obligations imposed by ethics rules make it awkward, if not impossible, for lawyers to overlap their personal and professional worlds.

While many lawyers are still scratching their heads—and rightfully so—some lawyers are making it work for them. Many have a personal Facebook account and a separate page for their firm. Task No. 1 for any lawyer using Facebook is mastering the site's ever-changing privacy and personalization settings. You need to understand and carefully control what the world can see.

Facebook has just introduced its "smart lists" feature, which automatically assigns friends to categories—work, school, family and city. Users can then add or remove their friends from categories after Facebook makes its recommendation. The functionality and longevity of this feature is still unclear, but smart lists may be a helpful way for lawyers to separate professional and personal contacts.

LINKEDIN

The so-called Facebook for professionals, LinkedIn is in a different category than many other social media tools because of its express business focus.

LinkedIn allows users to create public profiles that are much like Facebook profiles, only without the bachelorette party photostream. It allows professionals to upload a picture of themselves—usually the standard company headshot—and most of the information you would find on a standard résumé, including employment history, education, skills, publications and awards. LinkedIn users can see each other's profiles and connections (called "contacts") when they connect to each other.

Smart firms actively encourage all their lawyers to be on LinkedIn and to actively find real contacts (as opposed to wannabe friends) by relying on the power of exponential networking to identify connections to potential clients. They also request that lawyer profiles use consistent firm branding and language to ensure they make a professional presentation. A firm of 20 lawyers who each have 100 contacts may have more than 2,000 potential contacts at only one degree of separation. The trick is to connect these contacts to business development strategies.

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LinkedIn is a goldmine for potential firm hires, many of whom use the site to forge connections with practicing lawyers working in their desired area. The site offers a number of advanced features, including status updates, newsfeeds and interactive discussion forums, which provide a platform for firm outreach and marketing efforts. Smart law firms appreciate this by soliciting interest in job openings on LinkedIn. LinkedIn permits users to make recommendations or to endorse the services and performance of others, which raises obvious ethical issues.

LinkedIn also has the feature of asking questions of those within one's network and responding with answers. This blurs the difficult dividing line between professional development and the provision of legal advice.

TWITTER

Twitter gives you yet another way to send information to all who might be interested in things you might say. The interesting and overriding condition is that all Twitter updates, or "tweets," can have no more than 140 characters. Your tweets simultaneously go to your "followers," all those people who agreed to receive your tweets. You can choose to follow anyone on Twitter, including friends, business associates, colleagues within your firm or even total strangers. Tweets can be sent from any computer or smartphone.

Like Facebook, the Twitterverse abounds with users who use the service for personal communication. But by controlling who you "follow," or by setting up a Twitter account using the name of your firm, you can create an online community of people interested in the legal content you are tweeting.

Many are skeptical about how short Twitter updates that are just 140 characters long can have any marketing value. However, with over 200 million distinct users, few other platforms have similar instant reach. Tweeting what followers flock to hear is building reputations and delivering clients to some lawyers.

BLOGS

Law blogging, or "blawging," is a quick and useful way to report current developments to colleagues, clients and the general public.

The appeal of a blog is how easily and reliably it produces quality content in a timely fashion. All that a contributor needs to do is write and click to submit; there is no cumbersome editing process or having to wait for a print publication. For this reason, blogs have the potential to provide cutting-edge legal commentary about emerging issues before the journals. Relative to the other social media tools, it takes more work to create a blog. The regular writing you must do to keep posting updates can be a chore, but the rewards can be large, especially if you establish yourself as one

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of the go-to people in a given area of the law.

Many firms are focusing their efforts on firm-wide blogs or practice group blogs. Enlisting a group of colleagues, usually specialists in a given area, to commit to posting on a regular schedule helps spread the writing load around. It also means the blog remains a firm asset if one of the people posting to it leaves. Blogs with good reputations reflect well upon the expertise and diligence of lawyers, and present valuable client development opportunities from within the readership. They can generate real leads.

And if the mainstream media follows your blog, you'll find yourself quoted or invited to comment on television or radio—not a bad payback for something that requires little out-of-pocket investment, but your attention and time.

GOOGLE+

The newest kid on the social networking block is Google+ (pronounced "Google Plus"). Launched a few months ago, this is the search giant's most recent effort at social networking. Google+ allows users to send messages, post links and share photos with friends, family, etc. The platform's similarity to Facebook, its main competitor, is striking.

Google+ has leapfrogged other social networking sites with its ability to easily share information with specifically targeted groups of people, called "circles." Users can place work colleagues in one circle, clients in another, and personal contacts in another, allowing them to tailor their communication to each group. This achieves the same effect as grouping contacts on Facebook or increasing privacy settings on rival sites, but in a more streamlined and user-friendly way.

It may be too early to integrate Google+ into your law firm's social media strategy. It's still evolving and finding its way. As of November 2011, businesses could have a business page on Google+. And while it has a significant number of fairly geeky users, Google+ does not yet have a critical mass of mainstream users. One of the biggest challenges for Google+ is that Facebook users are completely immersed and pulling them away will be a challenge.

Smart firms should make clear that their policy regarding the use of networking sites applies equally to Google+. As Google starts to integrate all those other Google tools we use every day, more people will be drawn into using Google+. Keep a close eye on its growth. The social media landscape may look different in the next year or two, with Google+ playing a more prominent role.

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Specialized Legal Communities

There are social networking sites focused only on lawyers, both in-house and in law firms.

Legal Onramp is the best known of the sites aimed at legal professionals, specifically targeted at establishing close Web-based relationships between corporate counsel and outside counsel. It requires private law firm lawyers using the service to contribute substantive content (such as marketing materials) regularly. Access to Legal Onramp is controlled. Corporate counsel may join as of right now, but outside lawyers and third-party service providers need to be invited.

The site currently has over 12,000 members from over 40 countries, roughly 50% of whom are in-house counsel. Legal Onramp does contain closed sub-communities, where discussions can take place that are not accessible to the general membership.

Martindale-Hubbell Connected is Lexisnexis' social networking site for lawyers, which permits the establishment of contact networks, as well as a rich professional discussion environment.

JD Supra is a Web-based closed community of lawyers in the private sector and the business world. The prime advantage of all these services is the quality of the audience—you're addressing your peers, and in-house counsel who may just need your services. The challenge is that it takes work to build presence. You must engage with the community—work won't come the way of the lurkers.