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The Legal Case for Web 2.0

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As 2009 moves into full swing, many lawyers have already dipped at least one or two tentative toes into the fast-rushing waters of online social networking and blogging. Creating a LinkedIn account, a Facebook page, responding to a blog post or joining relevant legal listservs are all valuable steps toward harnessing the power of this exciting new wave of Internet-based communication.

However, an elite subset of attorneys has decided to go above and beyond the basics, maximizing use of these new online outlets to build law practices in a substantial way. Sometimes enlisting the help of outside experts, these lawyers have accelerated way past Social Networking and Blogging 101, and have begun to blaze trails into previously uncharted virtual territory.

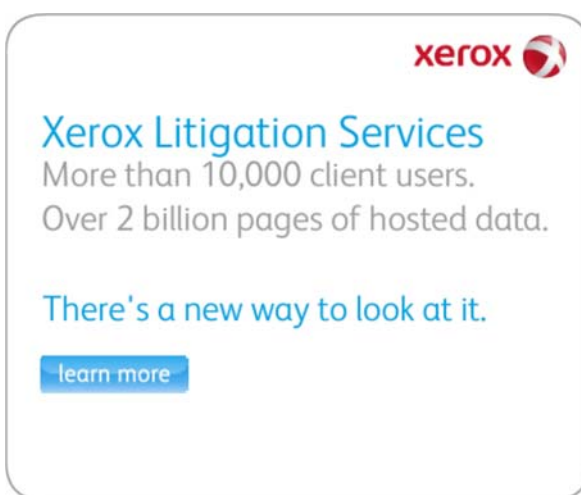
BEYOND THE BASICS

David Snead is an attorney who works with companies and individuals that support the Internet, and that create and distribute products and services electronically. Snead says that using online technology is incredibly important to attorney communication at present. He says, "Lawyers who are resisting [social networking] technology are shooting themselves in the foot -- there's nothing to be scared of. The Internet is where the interaction is now."

Snead notes that attending generally focused community networking events like Rotary or Kiwanis Club gatherings does not bring him clients. Instead, he employs several creative solutions using social networking tools.

First, he has an Instant Messenger link directly on his Web site. Snead explains, "I'm a big proponent of IM, and I prefer it over e-mail and telephone communication because it's more immediate and concise. It allows people to express themselves in real time and doesn't interrupt the business day too much. Since I'm in an Internet-oriented field, at least 30 percent of my clients use IM already." He says that an initial IM conversation with a prospect will often lead to a phone call, and then sometimes will result in a new client for his legal practice.

Second, Snead blogs for the Web Host Industry Review, which has brought him tremendous exposure in his field. He regularly gets 2000-3000 hits per blog entry. Snead admits that clients don't necessarily hire him because of the blog, but his clients read his posts and have a professional impression of him as a result. "Blogs are a way to establish credibility. Nearly all my new clients have read my blog and feel confident that I know what I'm talking



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BEING SUCCESSFUL

Ronald Coleman is a copyright, trademark and new media attorney at Goetz Fitzpatrick. He is a blogger and avid social networker who has aggressively leveraged the Internet to develop his law practice. Coleman says, "Successful social networking requires that you deliver value, in the form of content (or at least personality!) If you haven't got that, you come across as someone who is mainly looking for referrals. There's nothing wrong with that, because everyone is looking for referrals, but ... everyone is looking for referrals!"

Coleman's blog, Likelihood of Confusion, has made a huge difference in his self-promotion efforts as an attorney. "It's a great marketing tactic to write a blog that lots of people want to read. I have increased my blog's readership by developing and nurturing relationships with other influential bloggers -- some of whom first became aware of me when I was advertising on their blogs." Coleman suggests that lawyers choose a focus and a theme for their social networking activities, rather than a scattershot or generalist approach.

Blogging and social networking is certainly not for everyone, especially when people really have no real content to contribute. For some attorneys, avoiding participation in online networking will not greatly hurt their business prospects -- right now, anyway. However, Coleman's perspective is that opting out of social networking altogether, due to fear or lack of time, may have consequences down the line, if not right away. "Are people who don't participate also 'missing out' on the only way business will be done in the future, or something dire like that? Probably not, but younger people who are social networking savvy coming into the profession will eventually eat the lunch of many who do not get it."

MORE THAN ONE BLOG?

Nicole Black, Of Counsel to Fiandach & Fiandach, maintains five separate blogs on legal subjects ranging from the substantive (Practicing Law in the 21st Century and Sui Generis -- a New York Law Blog) to the humorous (Legal Antics). Black explains, "My blogs have resulted in many professional opportunities, including people contacting me for legal representation, media representatives contacting me for comments on various issues, and people contacting me to write law-related articles."

In addition to her blogs, Black is also active on Twitter and has had several people she's connected with on that site contact her regarding legal representation. In addition, on her blogs and Facebook page, she uses JD Supra, a legal content marketing Web site, to showcase articles and other professional writings for business development purposes. Black uses JD Supra widgets, which are basically RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds in a box that allow you to place a stream of your content (articles, pleadings, etc.) on any Web page, including blogs, professional Web sites, or Facebook pages. The widget streams your most recent articles, highlighting your writing in a way that is visually appealing.

USE YOUR WEB SITES

Jayne Navarre, a social media analyst and consultant to the legal industry and founder of Florida-based LawGravity.com, agrees that using online tools is a crucial element of business development for lawyers to explore. Having once been a marketing director at law firms, Navarre now specializes in teaching lawyers how to leverage Web 2.0 communications, including social networking and blogs, to dramatically further their legal client development efforts.

She notes that lawyers are becoming more sophisticated with online applications, and that she encourages clients to use their Web sites as more than just online brochures. "I work with lawyers to create Web sites with Web 2.0 components. Their sites foster two-way communication, as well as featuring Web analytics to track activity, search engine optimization so people can find them online, and conversion of traditional business development efforts into online equivalents."

Navarre says that one of the major pitfalls for lawyers, and most professionals, in online communication is that they mistakenly think they'll get something for nothing. "Some lawyers think of social networking as a transaction: I'll go there, I'll get something, and then I'll leave." Navarre explains that the secret of Web 2.0 is developing a two-way conversation where both parties benefit, and contribute.

In terms of blogging, Navarre realizes that not all lawyers will really benefit from all the work that a blog requires. "The way blogs work best is for attorneys who work within a specific, colorful niche. They can build a practice using social media because they can focus on being found through keywords and keyword strings. If the lawyer can index very high for those keywords, that will help him or her get found."

Lawyers also need to make use of the latest tools and applications, to make sure the tidal wave of online information doesn't swamp or drown them. Navarre suggests using an aggregator such as iGoogle, a dashboard that centralizes and displays designated blogs, listservs, news sites, etc. in one interface. Also, she recommends using a Flock browser, a free social Web browser based on Mozilla's Firefox, which delivers content directly into her browser window.

CONCLUSION

Advanced social networking and blogging is certainly a vital and expanding area of communication in the legal world, and those who learn how to unlock its potential stand to gain much from leveraging these tools. Clearly, there are many levels of participation, ranging from the very basic to the most complicated and content-rich communication outlets. The most important factor is really to understand whether you want to float down a lazy river, or ride the rapids, and what the consequences and benefits are of both approaches. Whichever option you choose, though, the message is clear -- when it comes to using online marketing tools to build your legal practice, make sure not to miss the boat!

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