





The Social Network

How writing, liking, tweeting, blogging, commenting, and joining the conversation will foster trust—and build your practice.

BY COLIN O'KEEFE

If you are looking for a way to spread your message, there is no better method than through social media. You can take your opinions, your expertise, your body of work and, sure, even your phone number, too, and push it out to thousands of people through an almost infinite number of channels.

At least, that's what a certain contingent of lawyers has unfortunately been led to believe. These lawyers, this group that sees social media as a broadcast medium only, is missing out.

The point is not to be heard—it's to be trusted.

In the early days of social media, now roughly a decade ago, a majority of what was out there, almost entirely blogs, was put forth by individuals and done so for fun. People would write on books or baseball or biking in their spare time, and they would gradually grow an audience that came to know who they were and trust in the content they were putting forth.

Whether it's on an Apple tablet or a stone one, the written word is a powerful medium. What was once a battle for eyeballs and readers' trust between, say, a couple of Texas Rangers bloggers, has moved quickly—and with force—into the world of business, and the law especially.

At the beginning of this year, 78 percent of the Am Law 200—the *American Lawyer's* top 200 law firms in the United States—published blogs. The firms that blogged, on average, rose in the rankings from the previous year and increased their revenue at a greater rate than the firms that did not. Seventy-six percent of respondents to a recent survey said they attribute some level of importance to a lawyer's blog when deciding which firms to retain.

However, the noteworthy idea here is not that blogs and social media are great and that you should use them—it's how much is now at stake if you don't, and the amazing results produced if you do.

If you are wondering what the former general counsel for the National Security Agency (NSA) thinks about the legality of the NSA's PRISM program, you can find it. If you're curious just how affordable the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act really is, the former director of Medicaid can explain it to you. And while the private sector obviously has more to gain, the Department of Labor itself is even blogging.

As more and more individuals, firms, and government entities are incentivized to publish on social media, the level of content we are seeing has reached a remarkable level. Those who were once the sources for articles are now the publishers themselves. So while this "everyone's a publisher" era has given rise to the mentality that you cannot trust anything written online, the truth is that the content at the very top is better than it has ever been, as the knowledge, expertise, and analysis is delivered from its source to the reader without a filter.

But with so many people publishing strong content, how do you find what's good? How do you discover what's relevant? Well, the market has adapted to the modern content infrastructure in astonishing fashion.

You no longer have to go out and look for news or interesting insight on the web; it comes to you—and it has for a while, actually.

By choosing people of interest to follow on Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn, you can be kept apprised of what they're seeing and reading. Google News, for example,

enables you to pull in content from tens of thousands of online publications on subjects as broad as "employment law" or as focused as "NLRB on employer Instagram policies"—and if you'd like, you can subscribe to them all in an RSS reader that checks each outlet constantly and delivers the latest to one place.

What's changed in recent years, though, is the remarkable ability of technology to identify those outlets and publications without any direction from you. Mobile applications Zite and Flipboard will take a look at your existing social presence—Facebook friends, Twitter followers, and LinkedIn connections—and build a personalized magazine for you. Zite will even allow you to "thumbs-up" or "thumbs-down" articles, learning what you like over time.

If you're unfamiliar with most or all of these tools, they might sound a bit intimidating, but the goal of each of these products is to be as accessible as possible. And once you pick them up, they're incredibly powerful for both personal and professional use.

Whether it's on your smartphone or tablet, give Flipboard or Zite an honest try. Because it's easier than you think, and once it takes, you have an incredible resource.

And that's the thing—what was once just a method for consumption is now a tool, because once you've become adept at listening, the next step is joining the conversation.

In speaking to countless lawyers who have fully adopted social media, and blogging in particular, there's no better way to learn about an area of law—whether it be broad or niche-centric—than to write about it. And as you write, as you join the conversation, your voice will be heard. If the content is good, the listening tools above will put the insight from the solo lawyer in Midland right next to the large law firm attorney in Dallas.

And as we return to the beginning, starting the cycle again, the goal isn't only to be heard; it's to be trusted. There's never been a better time to build trust as a lawyer.

Social media has given lawyers incredible incentive to be active online. It's granted all those interested an unprecedented level of access to expertise. It's given them necessary tools to join, find, and listen to that expertise and, above all, it has empowered them to join the conversation like never before. **TBJ**



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