

Social Media 101 for Lawyers

BY DEBRA L. BRUCE

Unless you live in a cave, you've heard of social media. Some lawyers dismiss it as something for kids. Others claim it's a waste of time. Many attorneys concede that social media might benefit their practice, but see too many risks. Lawyers made similar claims about the Internet and email in the 1990s. Here's a primer on the social media sites lawyers frequently use:

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEDIA?

"Social media" is an umbrella term for social interaction using technology (such as the Internet or cell phones) with any combination of words, pictures, video, or audio. In the early days of the Internet (sometimes referred to as Web 1.0), websites had only outbound content, resulting in one-way communication. In the Web 2.0 era, websites are interactive and visitors can communicate, collaborate, and socialize with the web host and each other. Users can share pictures, video, music, articles, or other user-generated content.

BLOGS

A blog is an online journal that discusses opinions or reflections on various topics and usually provides a mechanism for readers to comment. Lawyers write blogs (or "blawgs") to increase their visibility to the public, demonstrate their legal expertise, and interact with and influence thought leaders. Internet search engines, such as Google and Yahoo, like blogs because their content is updated frequently. Blogs form the core of the social media strategy of many lawyers because postings in other media often contain links to a blog for more in-depth discussion. The American Bar Association publishes a blawg directory at www.abajournal.com/blawgs. For a list of blawgs by Texas lawyers, visit blog.texasbar.com.

FACEBOOK (WWW.FACEBOOK.COM)

Facebook, a social networking website, allows its 400 million active members to post thoughts, status updates, pictures, or videos on their profiles. Members make public comments on the "wall" of the profiles of their "friends" — people with whom they have agreed to connect. Individual attorneys use Facebook to increase their visibility and reconnect with friends or clients. They participate in discussion groups, announce events and achievements, incorporate their blogs, and post classified ads. Facebook's casual and personal tone can enhance a member's "know, like, and trust" factor, which can aid in client development. Businesses join Facebook by creating "pages." More than 1.5 million businesses maintain Facebook pages.

LINKEDIN (WWW.LINKEDIN.COM)

Although LinkedIn has a smaller membership than Facebook (roughly 55 million members), its members tend to be more professionally focused than Facebook users. Executives from most Fortune 500 companies have profiles on LinkedIn. A LinkedIn profile looks like a resume on steroids. When people connect to you, there's a good chance they will review your

profile. LinkedIn also includes a jobs posting section. You can post status updates, invite people to link to you, and publish your blog. As you add connections, LinkedIn becomes more valuable. If you want to research a company, LinkedIn can show you everyone you are connected to who works there or used to work there, as well as your connections who know someone who works there. Many lawyers generate business from renewing their relationships with old contacts as they build their LinkedIn network. By joining carefully selected LinkedIn groups, you can raise your visibility among potential clients and referral sources. You can answer questions or pose them and learn what clients are thinking and talking about.

TWITTER (WWW.TWITTER.COM)

Twitter is called a micro-blogging site because posts cannot exceed 140 characters and the user's profile description cannot exceed 180. Twitter may be the fastest way to get up-to-the-minute news because Twitterers can "Tweet" news as it happens from their cell phones. You follow the Tweets of particular people or search on a word to see any Tweet containing that word. Companies use that feature to learn what customers think about them. To find Twitterers to follow, look at the "Lists" on the Twitter home pages of Twitterers in your client's industry. Twitter has few barriers to following and joining conversations. Twitterers share information with links to blog posts or articles with more in-depth discussion. They "reTweet" to their followers Tweets they find interesting, amusing, or informative. Lawyers can build a reputation for expertise through their Tweets and create valuable relationships with potential clients and referral sources they wouldn't ordinarily meet.

GOOGLE BUZZ (WWW.BUZZ.GOOGLE.COM)

On Feb. 9, Google introduced a new social media platform called Google Buzz. It integrates many features of other social media while helping to manage the torrent of information with relevance sorting tools. It facilitates "fast sharing" of pictures, videos, and Tweets from YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Picasa, and smart phones, with quick, high-resolution display. It can also pinpoint the location of a poster on Google Maps, which is called "geo-tagging" the post. Buzz is built into Gmail, Google's free web-based email service. The initial version automatically selected the people you frequently email and chat with via Gmail as your Buzz connections. Because your Buzz connections can see everyone else you're connected to, there was a backlash of concern over privacy issues. Although Google responded quickly with changes, it's not clear that all privacy issues have been resolved. As of this writing, the geo-tagging and connection to Gmail can create confidentiality risks for clients and ethical problems for lawyers who use Gmail. Google Buzz has the potential for making social media even more valuable and easier to use. However, lawyers would be wise to hold off on Google Buzz and avoid using Gmail for business or communicating with clients until the kinks are worked out.

YOUTUBE (WWW.YOUTUBE.COM)

YouTube is a video-sharing website, meaning just that — you can upload a video to YouTube’s website, which allows others to view it. Many lawyers have posted videos on YouTube advertising their services. Some are the same professional production ads seen on television, but many lawyers produce their own with a digital video camera. The videos titles and descriptions are searchable by key words, and viewers can rate the videos and post comments. YouTube designates how many times the video has been viewed. A cursory overview of lawyer videos on YouTube indicates that humorous ones tend to be viewed most often.

LEGAL ONRAMP (WWW.LEGALONRAMP.COM)

Legal OnRamp describes itself as “a collaboration system for in-house counsel and invited outside lawyers and third-party service providers.” Think of it as a LinkedIn for the legal industry, with many similar features. Although it has only about 10,500 members, more than half are in-house counsel, making it an attractive venue for business lawyers. The discussions and resources tend to focus on the relationships between large corporate clients and their counsel.

TEXAS BAR CIRCLE (HTTPS://TEXASBAR.AFFINITYCIRCLES.COM)

Texas Bar Circle is a social media network restricted to members of the State Bar of Texas. It, too, resembles LinkedIn. Groups have formed based on practice areas, geographic regions, law schools, and interests outside of law. Members report that they appreciate the opportunity to ask questions of other lawyers, engage in professional discussions, share resources, and develop relationships with lawyers they didn’t know.

MARTINDALE-HUBBELL CONNECTED (WWW.MARTINDALE.COM/CONNECTED)

Martindale-Hubbell Connected is another LinkedIn-like professional networking site targeted specifically to attorneys. A feature allows you to see which of your LinkedIn connections are also members of Connected, so that you can invite them to join Connected. It is not necessary to have a Martindale subscription. Connected boasts approximately 25,000 members. Compared with LinkedIn, Connected has a lethargic network. A quick perusal of Houston attorneys on Connected in February 2010 revealed that few had as many as five connections established. Some legal conferences create private groups for participants to download documents and connect.

AVVO (WWW.AVVO.COM)

Avvo describes itself as a website to provide guidance to consumers in choosing a lawyer. It compiles profile information and ratings of lawyers from state bar association records, self-disclosure, peer reviews, and client reviews. Once you “claim” your profile, others can post a review about you. You should

check it regularly to stay aware of what clients and other lawyers may post about you. The Avvo site and its rating system have been controversial. A significant portion of attorneys’ ratings appear to be based on how active and helpful they are on Avvo. A number of commentators have criticized Avvo for giving poor ratings to prominent attorneys and “no concern” ratings to lawyers who have been sanctioned by their bar association or convicted of crimes. Avvo also has its proponents, who laud its free directory listing. It provides an inexpensive opportunity to establish an Internet presence to small firm attorneys, in contrast to fee-based directories.

JD SUPRA (WWW.JDSUPRA.COM)

JD Supra is an online repository of legal documents, forms, and articles. It provides an opportunity to showcase your expertise. Some lawyers who have posted articles have been contacted to write a similar article for a legal publication, garnering more publicity and name recognition. You can make your JD Supra publications come up in a list in your Facebook profile. JD Supra publicizes postings on Twitter and LinkedIn. It showcases articles by sole practitioners and small firms alongside those of large firms. A number of firms post their firm newsletters and alerts on JD Supra.

LAWLINK (WWW.LAWLINK.COM)

LawLink is a social network geared toward the legal community. Membership is restricted to lawyers, law students, expert witnesses, and law professionals. Members can post documents, link to their blogs, participate in discussion groups, and ask or answer questions. LawLink awards participants points for posting documents, questions, answers, and other items. Members are listed in order of their accumulated points. The four most prolific posters of the month are showcased on the site’s home page for a month.

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