

Online networking for lawyers

Online social and business networking sites are a booming business. Tap into the success of these powerful tools by using them to strengthen your business and personal connections, share your expertise, and enhance your marketing and recruiting efforts.

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The latest generation of online technology, called Web 2.0, has transformed the Internet from a read-only environment to a place where you can actively communicate, exchange ideas, and share expertise. There is now more user-generated content than media-generated content on the Internet—one of the reasons “You” were *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year for 2006.

Business networking sites, such as LinkedIn.com, and their social counterparts, like Facebook.com, allow people to use the Internet to stay connected with each other. LinkedIn claims to have more than 25 million professionals using its site, and Facebook claims to have more than 100 million users.

Growth in the use of blogs, which are essentially online journals, is exploding. Technorati.com, a Website that indexes and tracks Web content, is actively tracking over 100 million blogs and says that more than 100,000 new blogs are created every day. According to *Real Lawyers Have Blogs* (<http://kevin.lexblog.com>), which monitors legal blog activity, 53 of the *AmLaw* 200 firms had bloggers as of March 2008, publishing 110 blogs. Justia.com listed over 3,000 blawgs (law blogs) as of September 2008.

Millions of people are using networking forums, and lawyers need to consider how to tap these resources for

personal networking, generating business, marketing, recruiting, and staying in touch with colleagues.

Social media sites allow you to share information about yourself with the people you know or with the public in general, depending on your tolerance for disclosure. They are typically free.

LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a great place to start. You set up an account and create a profile with information about yourself. You can publish less information than is printed on your business card or easily expand what’s there to create an online résumé. You might choose to start with just a little information and add more as you get comfortable with public disclosure.

LinkedIn is about creating “connections” with people in your firm, former classmates, clients, potential clients, and contacts in your address book. Those connections will get updates about you as you create new connections, update your profile, and participate in other LinkedIn activities.

For example, you can answer questions posted by other LinkedIn members using the LinkedIn Answers page, a robust question-and-answer forum. Or you can provide recommendations for your LinkedIn connections, as well as receive recommendations from them.

Facebook. This site also allows you to share information about yourself,

both personal and professional, if you choose. While LinkedIn was created to target professionals, Facebook was founded on the Harvard campus as a way for college students to communicate.

Facebook combined the contents of college “face books” (student directories that include mug shots) with the white boards found on dorm-room doors into an electronic medium. The site is becoming increasingly popular in the legal community partly because newer lawyers have continued using it after graduating from law school.

If you think of LinkedIn as an online billboard for professionals, Facebook would be a scrolling newsbar at the bottom of the screen. But don’t dismiss Facebook just because it was originally created for college students. It is a multi-billion-dollar company with 100 million active users, some of whom are bound to be clients or potential clients.

Facebook has opened its platform so

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that you can tie in other applications. For example, my blog posts are published in Facebook to my “friends.” If you track your movie-watching habits through Flixster, you can tie them into Facebook. You can list the books you are reading in Shelfari and display them on Facebook. You can even point your Facebook “friends” to your LinkedIn profile.

Facebook aggregates and distributes information in several ways. Your personal feed contains a history of what you have done on the site, such as adding

discussion forum. By limiting the audience to the legal community, the information available is stronger and very detailed.

Legal OnRamp takes social networking a step beyond the norm by developing a large repository of substantive legal knowledge to go along with its lawyer-to-lawyer networking. For example, your publications and expertise are linked to your Legal OnRamp profile. Searches for topics in Legal OnRamp retrieve your personal profile as well as your content.

E-mail or telephone communication is great, but there is only so much time in the day. Social networking sites allow you to cast a wider net with less effort and less time commitment.

new people to your friends list, adding new information to your profile, and communicating with other members. Your feed is published and combined with other personal feeds, so your Facebook friends can see your updated information combined with updates from their other Facebook friends. It’s a powerful tool for distributing information to your friends.

Of course, you will find a lot of frivolous communication in Facebook (just as there is a lot of frivolous communication in your firm’s e-mail). Most people do treat it more casually than LinkedIn, making it a great way to show your personal and human side. MySpace is a competitor to Facebook, but I have found few attorneys using it.

While the idea of an online social network just for lawyers may not sound exciting, developing a law practice is about social interaction and establishing relationships. You may be interested in the following lawyer-specific social networking sites.

Legal OnRamp. As with LinkedIn and Facebook, you set up a profile on Legal OnRamp and create connections with other members. The site is limited to practicing attorneys and in-house counsel and includes a robust

JD Supra. This site focuses more on content than connections. It allows you to publish documentation in a public sphere, showing the world your legal expertise. The site encourages you to publish your case decisions, forms, articles, and newsletters. All of your published content ties in to a profile that showcases your expertise. It has recently launched an application that ties your documents in JD Supra to your Facebook profile.

Martindale Connected. Lexis has published a beta version of this newcomer to the legal-specific social network, which will link social networking features into the larger Martindale attorney directory. At press time, only bits and pieces of this site were visible. But with its enormous database of attorney information and connection to Lexis legal information, Martindale Connected could become a powerful social network site for lawyers.

E-empowerment

Using online social sites is the 21st-century way to introduce yourself to the world—and invite others to come to you. When you present all your facets to best advantage, other attorneys will want to know you—and you can similarly

seek online interaction with colleagues and clients.

Create your personal brand. One of the most powerful tools in any marketing campaign is a brand. Career sites advise that creating your own brand to position yourself in the marketplace and attract your target clients is one of the most effective ways to reap career rewards.

If you already have a presence on the Internet, make sure that it says what you want clients or potential clients to know about you. If you do not know what online presence you have, Google yourself. You might find that the first few hits for your name are your firm, your LinkedIn profile, or your college reunion. Or you might find that you don’t show up at all.

Once you know what is out there, start building a Web presence for clients and potential clients to see. LinkedIn is one of the easiest places to start professionally. The more completely you fill out your profile, of course, the more people will get to know you; they’ll see your college, law school, and prior associations, for example.

Create links to your firm, your professional blog, and your volunteer organizations, and people can find out even more about you. Search for other LinkedIn members who share similar backgrounds—such as company, group, or alma mater—and invite people you know to connect. Set your profile to be “public,” and you will start seeing it in Google search results.

Cast a wider networking net. Many lawyers dislike in-person networking events. These time-consuming functions involve meeting people you don’t know and shoving a business card in their hands, with only so much time to introduce yourself and find out information about them. Then there is the follow-up problem—those business cards often just sit in a desk drawer, untouched and unseen.

Sites like LinkedIn and Facebook can help solve this problem. Have you met someone at a conference and wondered where he or she might have worked before? A business card can provide only current contact information, but the

person's LinkedIn profile might tell you much more.

Do you wonder what friends or colleagues you and this person have in common? Check the person's friends or connections. Do you wonder what books she is reading or what he is blogging about? Check out Facebook. You never know what connections you might make this way.

These sites are also a way to continue communicating with people after meeting them. E-mail or telephone communication is great, but there is only so much time in the day. Social networking sites allow you to cast a wider net for new professional connections with less effort and less time commitment.

Keep in touch with law firm alumni. You can tap into the social media your law firm alumni are already using instead of laboriously creating and maintaining your own online database. As an extranet provider will tell you, 99 percent of site maintenance is related to creating user accounts and retrieving passwords. Creating a firewalled community for alumni also means users will have to remember yet another log-on and password.

Both Facebook and LinkedIn allow you to create private groups and restrict who can join them. Yet you can easily add connections and track them as they change their profile information. Many firms are creating groups in Facebook and LinkedIn to keep in touch with their alumni.

Ramp up recruitment. Use social sites to stay in touch with law students and young attorneys who may be more interested in this form of communication and interaction than traditional approaches.

Last year I conducted a survey of my firm's summer associates and found that more than 90 percent had their own Facebook accounts; of those, two-thirds said they check Facebook at least once a day.

The future associates at your firm are already using Facebook as a way to communicate. Think about stepping into that forum with them.

Show your expertise. Blogs are one of the best ways to get your message out.

Blogging gets your expertise in writing and showcases it for the world.

Like other social media sites, blogs are free or cost little to start up. You do not have to learn any programming language or special techniques to create and run a blog. Wordpress, Blogger, Movable Type, and several other vendors provide free blogs and host them on their servers. I set up my blogs in less than 10 minutes. You just pick a design and start writing.

Setting up, in fact, may be the easiest part. The hard part is deciding what you

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want to blog about and creating content. You might want to start by writing about recent case decisions or regulatory developments in your practice area. Blog content is picked up in search engines, and other sites (like Facebook) can easily link to blog posts, directing traffic to your blog.

Networking is really about giving something to the group, and a blog is a great way for you to join the conversation. Blog content gets indexed rapidly by Internet search engines and displayed higher in results than static Adobe documents published to your firm's Web site. You can raise your profile as an expert by publishing good content on a blog.

Also start searching and reading other blogs and sites on the same or similar topics. You can engage other blog authors in conversations on your topic by leaving comments and joining their social networks. Make yourself known to them and provide relevant commentary to add to the conversation.

Blogs can be very powerful marketing tools and allow for a great deal of customization. There are several vendors who can design the look of the blog, help you plan the creation of blog posts, and spread the word about your blog.

Kevin O'Keefe of *Real Lawyers Have Blogs* is an excellent resource for lawyers who want to use these new marketing technologies or just be aware of what's available.

Words of caution

For lawyers, blogs and profiles on social media sites can be considered advertising in some states. If you use these sites, make sure you comply with your state's ethical requirements.

You also need to be cautious about inadvertently creating an attorney-client

relationship by giving advice online. Put clear disclaimers on your blog, be careful answering legal questions, and focus on supplying information.

Some law firms lack cohesive policies about blogging and other social networking activities, and some firms ban the use of these sites. Check the policy at your firm.

If you set up an account on a social networking site, you need to periodically check that your profile remains true and does not violate ethics rules for your jurisdiction. If you do not regularly maintain your profile, delete your account.

Whether you have set up an Internet presence or not, you should be checking to see what might be out there about you or your firm. Set up a search for your name and see what turns up. It is easy to set up a perpetual search through Google Alerts, Yahoo, or several other search providers. They will alert you when new items about you appear on the Internet.

The Web is now a place where lawyers communicate, share expertise, and strengthen personal and business connections. Online social sites can be a powerful tool in your networking strategy. ■