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THE PLACE TO NETWORK

Jumpstart Client Development with Social Networking

By Christy Burke

Teens, college kids and recent graduates have grown up with the Internet and social networking sites in their bloodstreams —they are constantly communicating with each other through Web sites. If you are not convinced that you're slightly out of the loop on this trend, ask yourself when was the last time you got "poked" or "threw a sheep" at someone on Facebook?

Adults who have been out of school for a few (ahem) years may find social networking tools a bit intimidating, or think that they're just for kids or recreational purposes. And many lawyers, who are among the more techno-phobic of professionals, are often reluctant to learn new technologies, especially when they're so busy doing grown-up things like billing hours and meeting with clients.

The truth is that social networking is rapidly becoming a highly viable way for attorneys to expand their books of business. Social networking goes far beyond MySpace and Facebook — the options are constantly growing as the Internet increasingly takes on the roles of publisher, matchmaker, business developer and research library.

The Internet can be your new best friend when it comes to generating leads. Just for kicks, try "Googleing" your name, your firm's name and your competitors' names. You can easily see what kind of exposure is available on the web and notice what you've already garnered, perhaps without even realizing it. You'll also be privy to your competitors' tactics which may make you realize you need to step up your Internet presence quite a bit. Frankly put, the more places you can post yourself on the web, the more "hits" people will find when they Google your name.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Setting up a basic Facebook (www.facebook.com) or MySpace (www.myspace.com) page takes less than 15 minutes to do. It's very simple, as long as you know your name, e-mail address and educational history. And the best part? It's free!

New York solo attorney Evans Legros has gotten business through social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. He practices immigration, real estate, matrimonial and entertainment law, often working with clients who reside outside of the U.S. Legros' music clients started listing him as their attorney on their MySpace pages. When their friends were on those sites, they saw Legros' name displayed and contacted him for legal services. Legros has landed several clients this way, some of whom are well-known celebrities that have brought him additional notoriety.

Paul Gardner, Managing Partner of the Gardner Law Group in Baltimore, is a music entertainment attorney who has successfully landed high-profile clients through MySpace. Gardner was turned on to MySpace by his sister and he started by adding himself to Sean Combs' (formerly Puff Daddy) page as a "Friend." The rush of being the "friend" of a superstar like Combs inspired Gardner to add more and more friends to his list. For the first three months, he was adding anyone and everyone he could find to his page.

"Then, all of a sudden," says Gardner, "the friends weren't so random — they were people in my industry. One of the people I picked to contact was guitarist BB McGill — she looked cool. I copied and pasted my short pitch and sent it to McGill, telling her that I was an entertainment lawyer and to tell me if she needed to bounce questions off me, I'm here."

A day or two later, McGill responded and thanked Gardner for his e-mail, saying he must have heard the good news — that she was going on tour with Beyoncé as lead guitarist and leader of the star's all-female band. Gardner sent McGill references that included OutKast and she asked him to renegotiate her contract, which he did at no charge. He now reviews her contracts and helped her to incorporate. Gardner may never have had access to McGill if not through MySpace.

Gardner recommends that when communicating with prospects on social networking sites, lawyers should offer to answer questions free of charge. He favors this softer approach over suggesting a one-hour consultation, which can imply that the prospective client might not be paying now, but will pay later. He also notes that the search tools on MySpace and other sites can be very helpful — you can search by city or by keywords like "musicians."

Clearly, MySpace is not equally useful for all types of attorneys. But judging from Legros' and Gardner's examples above,

it's an easy, inexpensive marketing method which has tremendous potential to deliver results and dollars with minimal energy and monetary expense for the lawyer.

BUSINESS NETWORKING SITES

Attorneys with a more business-to-business or corporate focus find success uncovering prospects on business networking sites such as LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and ZoomInfo (www.zoominfo.com), which are also free to join. These sites allow you to post a photo and basic and educational information just like MySpace and Facebook. Both sites give you the option of entering in your work history timeline — where you worked and when. This not only enables you to search for and contact people — it also allows former colleagues to find you!

Once you've entered in your background details, you can search for former classmates and also former colleagues, or co-workers at your current firm. Maybe you went to Connecticut College and want to see who else in your company or city is also a graduate, or you're looking for a contact name at a company to pitch them on your services. Ed Poll even recommends asking your LinkedIn contacts to make introductions for you so you're not cold-contacting people.

A unique feature of LinkedIn is that it enables people to endorse each other professionally. Why not approach some of your most satisfied clients about joining LinkedIn, and then ask them to post a positive testimonial quote about you? Most likely, they'll be happy to do it and you'll reap the benefits when people read the rave on your profile page.

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BLOGS

Ed Poll runs a blog called "LawBiz[®] Blog," so he knows this territory first-hand. He says that lawyer-run blogs have become incredibly prevalent and powerful in the legal industry, and can be a terrific marketing vehicle for their authors. He notes that some blogs are so widely read and respected that they actually have the power to influence legislation and bring about major business leads. Blogging can be a great public relations advantage, too, since reporters often quote bloggers as sources in their articles.

The tricky part about blogging for attorneys is to share expertise about a specific slice of the legal industry, but to make sure that you are not actually giving out official legal advice. Poll insists that lawyers be sure to put a disclaimer on their blog, making it clear that they are not giving legal advice. Also, he suggests that attorneys not answer direct questions from potential or current clients.

Legal marketing consultant Larry Bodine estimates that there are about 5000 professional blogs written by lawyers right now, and that number is rapidly increasing. Bodine notes that the highest percentage of legal blogs exist in criminal law and intellectual property practice areas. He suggests that attorneys ideally should find a very specific, focused niche to blog about — not a general topic where there will be many other blogs covering that subject matter. For example, don't just blog about immigration law — blog about immigration law for French and Italian models who want to come to the U.S.

Creating a blog is relatively straightforward for an attorney to do and costs about \$15 per month when using TypePad[®]. However, it's the cost of your own *time* for ongoing maintenance and updating of the blog which is the real consideration. Bodine writes appropriately-named "Larry Bodine's LawMarketing Blog."

He says, "Blogs need to be updated at least twice a week. The reason that blogs are interesting is that they call attention to current verdicts, rulings and changes in regulations."

If you have decided to start a blog, consider teaming up with another attorney to share the writing workload, hire a freelance writer to help you when you're swamped, or stockpile a number of "canned" posts which are not time-sensitive and can be used when no news items are coming up in your field.

FIND THE TIME FOR SOCIAL NETWORKING

No attorney will argue that business development activities are vital to the health of any legal practice. However, networking and marketing efforts frequently end up on the back burner, especially when the legal workload gets heavier.

The beauty of social and business networking sites is that they don't take up a lot of time to set up and use. Blogging can be more time-consuming, but if you are smart about it, you'll either share the workload with others or pick a topic where you have a steady stream of potential blog topics coming your way.

One thing you can be sure about is that social networking is not going away — it is shaping the way that people do business. In some cases, these sites are actually determining which providers clients consider for legal services. Why not join Facebook, MySpace, ZoomInfo and LinkedIn and consider starting a blog? Who knows — you might actually have some fun in the process — and wouldn't that be a welcome addition to your workday!



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