

Not Your Marketer's Social Media: Ten Ways Lawyers Can Benefit from Non-Marketing Uses of Social Media

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LinkedIn. Facebook. Twitter. Social media as a marketing vehicle is all the rage. But if you take a good look, you'll find lawyers benefiting from social media in many ways. Learn more from Dennis Kennedy and Tom Mighell in the social media program at the ABA marketing conference.

Lawyers often say that social media does not make sense for them because they don't believe using social media will bring them new clients or help them get more business from their existing clients. At the same time, it seems that lawyers are routinely pummeled with messages that using social media is an essential part of legal marketing. As is the case with so many things, the truth probably lies somewhere in between.

In talking to many lawyers about social media, we've found that their natural reticence to try new technologies, combined with a natural suspicion of the hype and overpromises made by social media "gurus," leads to a limited understanding of what can be done with social media, not just for marketing but for other purposes as well.

In this article, we want to step back and take a closer look at the potential *non-marketing* benefits of social media for lawyers. Once you understand that social media serves purposes *other* than marketing, you can better evaluate whether or not it makes sense for you. After reading this you might decide to use social media for marketing purposes, but we think it's more likely that you'll find great non-marketing value in social media as well.

Social Media Realities. First, let's dispense with the notion that your clients, referral sources and potential clients are not using social media. As of August 2011 Facebook claimed over 750 million members, a large percentage of whom interact with the site on a daily basis. LinkedIn recently passed the 100 million user mark, and Google+ eclipsed 20 million users within only a few weeks of its launch. On Twitter in August, the revelation of a celebrity couple's pregnancy led to an astonishing 8,868 "Tweets" *per second* announcing the happy news to the rest of the Twitterverse. Get used to it – the people around you are using social media.

Even if you think of social media as a passing and irrelevant fad despite the above statistics, it's hard to argue credibly that 750 million people are making a silly, misguided use of an irrelevant service. There's no question Facebook and users of other social media services find something of value through online

participation. The key to a lawyer's successful use of social media is to understand what that value is for others, and how the lawyer might use it to his or her advantage.

Back to the Basics. Although it has evolved over the past few years, the current Wikipedia definition of social media is “the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue.” More specifically, social media can be thought of as “a group of Internet-based applications . . . that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” These applications include blogs and microblogs, instant messaging, picture sharing, location tools, crowdsourcing, and others – not just social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. A common classification scheme divides social media into six categories: 1) “collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), 2) blogs and microblogs (e.g., WordPress, Tumblr, Twitter), 3) content communities (e.g., Youtube), 4) social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), 5) virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and 6) virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life).” A common element of each category is the ability to easily share elements of content, often by a simple button labeled “share.”

To boil social media down to its essence: it's about moving from one-way social communication to social interaction enabled by and over the Internet.

Notice that none of the definitions we've just covered say that social media is a marketing tool. Of course, marketing is one (but just one) form of social communication. However, we'd be hard-pressed to find many people who would consider marketing their favorite form of social communication, let alone their favorite form of social interaction.

What people seem to like best about social media is the way it allows them to connect and reconnect with people who are or have been important in their lives. It's said that the fastest-growing group of Facebook users is grandparents wanting to see pictures of their grandchildren. Nearly every social media user has a story of reconnecting with a friend from earlier in life – often childhood – with whom they'd lost contact. When you think about social media from that perspective, it makes it easier to understand why such tools can be so popular.

Ten Great Non-Marketing Uses of Social Media. And it's from that perspective that we want to look at some of the *non-marketing* ways lawyers might find value in social media. Here are ten suggestions for working with social media that even the most skeptical lawyer might appreciate.

- 1. Reconnecting.** Perhaps the most radical suggestion we'll make in this article is that lawyers simply start using social media for one of its original purposes – reconnecting with people who were once important to you. It's perfectly fine if your use of social media starts with seeing pictures of grandchildren, communicating with children in college, or planning high school or family reunions. Every lawyer undoubtedly has a number of former colleagues who have moved on to other firms or jobs; LinkedIn is full of such “alumni groups,” where former colleagues

keep in touch. Don't overlook the psychological return on investment you'll realize from these reconnections.

2. **Combating Information Overload.** A common objection we hear about using social media is that it is just one more information "silo" or fire hose of information for people who already have trouble simply keeping up with their email. Surprisingly, social media often works as a good filter, to bring you information that is more focused and relevant. People you "follow" on Twitter often point out excellent articles and blog posts on topics of interest. You can also call on your connections to get answers to specific questions, or for opinions on a particular issue; called "crowdsourcing," this is one of the great added benefits of social media.
3. **Keeping up with New Developments.** There is definitely a "real-time" element to social media that can be incredibly useful. There have been countless events, including earthquakes, hurricanes and other events, where the "news" appeared on Twitter well before traditional news outlets. One of Twitter's best features is its real-time search functionality that allows you to monitor and learn about developments involving clients, competitors, and subject matter topics, among other things.
4. **Learning New Subject Matter.** Blogs, podcasts, SlideShare (for presentation slides) and other social media tools are great resources to learn more about a new topic. Twitter Search can also be used to find good resources your connections are linking to on various topical areas. LinkedIn's Groups allow you to discuss issues with other knowledgeable people in a particular field. The relatively new Quora service is a social media tool that lets users ask and answer questions on specific subjects.
5. **Identifying Trusted Resources.** By following the steps above, participating in social media can help you find trusted resources – those who point to and curate useful content, or consistently provide helpful answers. It does not take very long to identify a trusted resource. As search engine results for common questions turn up less useful results than ever (try searching for a color inkjet printer with good reviews and then sifting through the results), you can use social media to identify knowledgeable people who can point you in the right direction. And the "social" part of social media makes it a relatively simple step to interact with them.
6. **Following Thought Leaders and Experts in Your Field.** You may be surprised at the number of prominent people in their fields who are active in social media, and that it's easy to find and "follow" them. Take advantage of their comments on new developments, links to articles and blog posts they find interesting, and other comments they make.
7. **Building a Professional Identity.** Social media tools, especially LinkedIn, Facebook and Google+, allow you to create profiles where you can provide biographical and other professional information; in some ways, these profiles can act as an online resume. For many people, these profiles rank highly in any Google search on their names. But you should do more than simply fill out a profile: your participation in social media goes a long way in creating a professional identity. Don't just consume information; answer questions, post interesting links, provide helpful commentary or express interests in common with others.
8. **Networking.** LinkedIn is generally considered the social media tool used most often by lawyers. Its usefulness in job search and hiring is undisputable, and many recruiters have commented

that LinkedIn profiles are already taking the place of the traditional paper resume. However, thinking of LinkedIn only as a job search tool limits its utility. Consider these examples of other things you can accomplish:

- getting some quick background information or common connections for opposing counsel, co-counsel or even a client while on a phone call
- identifying someone with a common connection in a corporate legal department when you have an issue to discuss
- finding a resource at a vendor, community organization or other entity in whom you are interested

LinkedIn and other social media services are excellent tools for locating people and then turning cold calls into “warm” calls.

- 9. Joining Communities of Interest.** LinkedIn Groups and similar features of other tools allow you to join or create groups around a particular subject matter or topic. While high school reunions or fan clubs are obvious examples, you will also find a large number of groups devoted to focused legal or law practice management topics. In some ways, these groups are the descendants of the old email listservs, but they are easier to use and manage. You can create groups of local lawyers interested in any area of special interest, connect the people who join and even be a leader of that community.
- 10. Finding Competitive Intelligence.** Because social media posts, profiles and other activities are typically public, you may find some unexpected opportunities to conduct competitive intelligence. Check out the connections and postings of current clients, prospective clients, and others, to learn more about developments in their businesses. The Company pages on LinkedIn are an excellent resource for finding out the latest on corporations – comings and goings of employees, news alerts, and other items of interest.

Getting Started or Restarted. Here are some practical tips for starting or reenergizing your use of social media from a “non-marketing” perspective:

- **Take Off the Marketing Blinders.** Social media is a big, diverse world. Stop thinking only about all social media use only in terms of marketing. Consider the uses we list above and find a few that seem promising and comfortable for you.
- **Observe, then Decide on a Goal.** One of the worst mistakes you can make with social media is to jump in without understanding the culture, flail around aimlessly, alienate others and then decide that it’s worthless to you. It is difficult to overestimate the value of spending some time on different social media tools as an observer and getting the feel for how things work. Spend a few weeks using Twitter without tweeting. Explore and then decide what you might like to accomplish. One suggestion is simply to spend some time seeing what is happening with your favorite TV show or sports team on various social media tools.
- **Identify One or Two Social Media Tools that Seem to Fit You.** There are a lot of social media tools out there, and they work in different ways. It’s difficult to use all of them –

or for lawyers who are busy, it can be difficult to use more than one or two. It's likely that just one or two tools will make the most sense for you. Put your efforts into those and save other tools for other days.

- **Learn Your Tools Well.** Social media platforms evolve, adding new features on a regular basis. Keeping up with new features can create new opportunities and provide very useful information for you. Make it a habit to keep up with new feature announcements and try to learn how to use them on a regular basis.
- **Know Your Audience.** Better yet, know your *target* audience. You want to make sure that you are swimming in the same stream as the people you're targeting. Consider both the tone and substance of what you post in light of the audience you want to reach and influence. From time to time, pause and check whether your actual audience is different from what you intended.

Concluding Thoughts. As you can see, these “non-marketing” uses of social media can have great value on their own; the great attention paid to using social media purely for marketing purposes detracts from the essential nature of social media as a social, interactive, experimental, evolving medium with lots of diversity and opportunity. In many ways, social media is co-evolutionary – your initial intention and effort will no doubt be modified through interaction with your audience. What “works” today might not work tomorrow. Opening your perspective to the many dimensions of social media beyond marketing will result in more rewarding social media efforts and experiments.

The not-so-well-kept secret here is that if you use social media in the ways described above, you really are engaged in marketing; the fact of simply engaging with others on social media tools can lead to new or additional business from existing and new clients, as you move from simple “communication” toward social interaction.

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