

Why Lawyers Should Plus the Google+ Project

By Ken Chan, Elizabeth Roig, and Tim Stanley

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In Silicon Valley, Google and Facebook are gearing up for battle in the social networking and individual identity space. Is this the next Facebook? Can Google conquer the social media space? Get an overview from their Mountain View neighbors at Justia. Tim Stanley speaks on social media at the upcoming ABA marketing conference.

In Silicon Valley, Google and Facebook are gearing up for battle in the social networking and individual identity space (and what is likely to be an upcoming battle in Internet search). Last June, Google launched its latest salvo when it unveiled the Google+ project (Google+), its newest social networking platform, which the technology press has described as Google's answer to Facebook. We will present an overview of Google+ and explain how lawyers can benefit from it.

Google has long coveted the social networking realm. Its previous attempts include Orkut and Google Buzz. Orkut, which was launched in 2004, is a niche site that remains popular in Brazil and India. The one-year old Google Buzz is a more recent addition to the Google portfolio. Unfortunately, it was immediately greeted with furor from privacy advocates because Google publicly linked persons together based on their private Gmail contact history. Regardless, neither of these products have garnered sufficient traction to threaten Facebook, so Google is hoping with Google+ that the third time is the charm.

So, what is Google+?

Profiles with Real Identities

At the heart of Google+ is the user profile. Your Google+ profile is the center of your online presence in the Google social community. Having a Google+ profile will probably be required for many Google services which involve social interaction. To its credit, Google has required users to register their Google+ profile with real names. The search giant has suspended thousands of accounts with company names or pseudonyms to combat the fake names and anonymous profiles that have plagued last generation's social networking sites. Indeed, Google Chairman Eric Schmidt has stated that persons who do not want to use their real name should not use Google+.

If you intend to use Google+ for professional purposes, start with your Google+ profile by clicking on the "Profile" button. On the Profile page, select the "Edit Profile" button to summon the editing tool

that will allow you to enter your professional biography, personal information, and links to other websites, such as your LinkedIn profile, Twitter account, or law firm website or blog.

While the Google+ profile template is not as detailed as the ones on LinkedIn or Facebook, Google should be adding new features or fields in the future. The other Profile tabs include "Posts," "Photos," "Videos" and "+1's." The Posts serve the same function as Facebook's Wall, which displays your status updates and recommended websites. We will discuss some of the other features in-depth later in the article.

Adding Others to Your Google+ Circles

After you have created your Google+ profile, you will need to build your social network through Circles. Google+ Circles is similar to following a person on Twitter, instead of friending a person on Facebook, since it does not require the consent of the other person. However, you can limit access to your Google+ posts and profile information by restricting it to persons in certain Circles.

At its essence, a Google+ Circle is a list of persons that share a common relationship with you. Google+ offers some default Circles, such as Family, Friends, Acquaintances and Work. Additionally, you can create and name Circles according to your own preferences. For example, you can add all of your colleagues to a Work circle or you can manage your relationships more precisely with individual Circles for each place of employment.

If you have a Gmail account, Google allows you to easily add your email contacts to different Circles. You can drag people into one Circle or multiple Circles, e.g. a work colleague who is also your friend may be in your Friends and Work Circles. Bear in mind that adding persons to your Circles carries important privacy implications, which we will cover next.

Google+ Posts & Streams

Google+ allows you to share status updates, photos, videos or links with others in your network. The user interface for posting to your stream is similar to Facebook's interface. If you have posted on Facebook, you will no problem sharing on Google+.

When you post, you can select the distribution Circle for your information. You can select one or more Circles, all your Circles, Extended Circles (which is like Friends of Friends in Facebook) or even the Public.

While Facebook allows you to create lists of friends and limit particular posts to certain Facebook friends (similar to Google+ Circles), Google+'s user interface, from creating the Circles to choosing the Circles to share with on a particular post, is much more intuitive and user friendly. You can certainly adjust the settings on Facebook to control who sees your Facebook posts, but this feels like an afterthought in Facebook whereas affirmatively adding contacts to Circles is central to the Google+ experience.

Google+ users can view your posts on the Posts page of your profile, which is similar to a Facebook Wall. If other users have added you to their Circles, your posts will also appear in their Google+ Stream, which corresponds to the Facebook News Feed. The degree of access granted to other Google+ users depends on the Circle to which you have added them. Persons who visit your profile can only see the latest status updates that they have permission to see. If they are not in one of your Circles, then will only see the status updates marked "Public" for all to see.

Like Facebook, Google+ lets you comment on other people's posts. Engaging in a dialog on Google+ can attract the attention of your peers or help distribute your ideas to potentially thousands of individuals even if you only have a few followers. This is especially true in public posts. For example, commenting on a "Public" post by a Wall Street Journal reporter may get the attention of the reporter and others following the reporter, even if the reporter is not following you.

The +1 Button

To spread the adoption of Google+, Google has released the +1 button, which appears on both Google's paid and organic search results. To +1 a webpage, you must have a Google+ profile.

The +1 button allows Google+ users to publicly recommend a webpage. If you +1 a webpage it may increase its ranking in the Google search results for other users who are connected to you through Google+ or other social networks such as Twitter. If a person in one of your Circles has +1'd a webpage in your search results, Google will also display the person who recommended the webpage. Your Google+ profile will also list all the webpages you have +1'd. In addition, when a person uses the Google search engine, for some webpages Google will display how many people have +1'd each search result (search "Google" in Google and you will see this). For law firm websites and blogs, the +1 button allows visitors to help promote your content in the Google search results. If you want to add the +1 button to your own website, Google offers a tool for generating the appropriate code.

Other Features in Google+

Google+ also offers users a few unique features.

A Hangout allows up to 10 people to engage in a group video chat. The main window focuses on whoever is talking the loudest. It is easy to set-up a Hangout, which can be posted to your Circles or the Public. Michael Dell, the CEO of Dell Computers, often does Hangouts, in case you ever want to video chat with him.

Sparks allows Google+ users to store custom news feeds on a person, company, location or other topic. The feeds will return the same news stories as the personalize feature in Google News, but with the viral +1 button and Share link, so that you can quickly share the story with your Circles or the Public. It is the Google+ way of helping you find interesting stories to share with others.

Additional features include a group text chat service called Huddle and, of course, games, like Angry Birds.

Future Google+ Features to Come: Business Profiles

Google is currently developing profiles for businesses on Google+. That they did not offer business profiles at launch and actively deleted business profiles (unless you were Ford or GM) led to much interesting discussion in the blogosphere and elsewhere. Google says that they are refining the experience for businesses, with reports claiming deep analytics and integration with AdWords and Google Places. When Google+ does open up for businesses, you will want to establish a profile for your law firm.

How Lawyers Can Benefit from Google+

At this early stage for Google+, lawyers should build up their profiles and relationships. It will never be easier to build a network on Google+ than in the beginning when people are actively seeking new personal and professional connections.

1. Create a Profile.
2. Connect your accounts on other social networks, like LinkedIn and Twitter.
3. Share interesting articles that you have seen on the Internet and set the privacy setting to "Public" to allow the most expansive reach.
4. Recommend your own lawyer profile, website or blog through the +1 button. If your website does not have a built-in +1 button, you can still recommend it by installing the Google +1 Button extension for the Google Chrome browser.
5. Expand your professional network by adding other lawyers and professionals to your Circles.
6. Create a business page on Google+ when Google unveils this feature, and connect it with your Google Places/Maps page.

Right now Google+ is invitation only, although the number of invitations are not really that limited. If you need an invitation, send us an email with your Google Account or other email address to ginvite@justia.com and we will send you an invitation.

Google+ now (September 1, 2011) has over 25 million users and is increasing by one million users a day, which makes it the fastest growing web site ever recorded. Google has a huge incentive to keep improving Google+ as it competes with Facebook in the social and identity space. And with Google+, Google can use information about individuals and their relationships to give better personalized search results. Once Google opens Google+ for businesses, it will be an important tool for law firms to interact with the community, and may provide unique advantages through integration with Google places and the Google search results.

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