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IOLTA Feature

Pro Bono

Testing the Waters: Social media in IOLTA programs

LRIS

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Delivery

As Interest on Lawyers' Trust Account (IOLTA) programs throughout the country continue to tread water in this economy plagued by low interest rates, it is refreshing to know that the newest ways to communicate with your audiences and build relationships are free. Some IOLTA programs have begun to embrace social media sites – like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr – by diving into the water with both feet. For other IOLTA programs that may be a little more hesitant, your colleagues who have already tested the waters can help answer some of the most common questions about social media.

IOLTA

**Social Media
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From the Chair

What do we say in the social media world?

**Grantee
Spotlight**

A very basic definition of social media, is “people using tools (like blogs and video) and sites (like Facebook and Twitter) to share content and have conversations online.” ¹

**News and
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“Social media is just another way of communicating what you’re already doing,” says Catherine Sanders Reach, director of the [ABA Legal Technology Resource Center](#). “If you have things to say in a newsletter, on a web site – you have things to say in social media,” she continues. “Like all other communication efforts you still have to create effective messages, you still have to target your audiences, and you still have to choose the most effective tools to reach your audience,” Sanders Reach adds. An additional element in social media strategy is finding ways to be engaging, interactive, and responsive to feedback and messages. All things that make sense as we communicate with each other, but may not come naturally for organizations.

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Whereas with traditional media approaches organizations were often concerned about controlling the message, social media opens up communities and forums where anyone can comment, blog, or post information about your organization. Shannon Willis Scruggs, executive director of the [South Carolina Bar Foundation](#) (SCBF), remembers attending an American Bar Association workshop where the speaker on social media said, “If you’re not going to be talking about yourself ... someone else is.” That was inspiration enough for her to create a Facebook Page for the SCBF. ² Facebook, with an estimated 400 million users, is currently one of the most popular social media tools for IOLTA programs.

IOLTA Group on Facebook

For IOLTA directors and staff already on Facebook, a new [IOLTA Programs Group](#) has just been created to share information and help extend the outreach taking place nationwide between programs.

“We ventured into this, not to fund raise, but as an extension of our public relations efforts,” Scruggs said. “It just seemed like the next natural progression for us.” Scruggs has also begun using Twitter and now sends out “tweets” almost daily to her list of followers.³ She views these tools as an extension of her day-to-day work – using and sharing content she has already developed in new ways.

IOLTA programs are naturally skilled at building relationships, community support, and sharing information. Social media allows you to do just that – online. [The Equal Justice Coalition](#), created by the [Massachusetts](#) and [Boston Bar](#) Associations and the [Massachusetts Legal Assistance Corporation](#) (MLAC), started a “group” page on Facebook about 18 months ago to help publicize their annual Walk to the Hill event. ⁴ Brianne S. Miers, communications director for MLAC says that having a specific focus for their group on Facebook helps engage members. “We’re asking them to do something, to volunteer for the event, send letters, etc.”

“We definitely are working to integrate our traditional media efforts with our social media efforts,” Miers said. Admitting that there is an additional time commitment involved in keeping up with the new media channels, Miers says their use of social media tools have quickly become additional steps in their regular communications process. “Now when we issue a press release, we have to think about how we will add it to our web site, how we share the news on Twitter, what goes on Facebook, for example,” Miers said.

What is it going to do for us?

Since IOLTA programs are always looking for ways to increase funding for legal services to the poor, will social media bring in donations or additional funding? In most cases, foundations and other nonprofits have not seen social media efforts translate directly to dollars in the bank. However, like other communications efforts, social media builds awareness of your programs and projects, expands your audience to some people you may not reach in other traditional communication methods, and helps create relationships with those individuals through online conversations and information sharing.

“I think you get a second bite at the apple,” said Scruggs, executive director of the South Carolina Bar Foundation, of their social media efforts. “You might be missing that second chance to catch someone’s attention if you are not using social media,” she continued. Although social media tools are not replacing traditional communication tools in IOLTA programs like newsletters or e-blasts, they are helping cross-promote and publicize these traditional tools in a new way.

The [Montana Justice Foundation](#), which uses Facebook and Twitter, has had success in garnering media coverage of events via Twitter. “The media coverage alone we’ve received (from Twitter) has been worth it,” said Amy Sings In The Timber, executive director of the Montana Justice Foundation. Previous attempts at inviting media to events were not successful until recently, which she attributes directly to their use of Twitter. She also credits their social media efforts for bringing a broader range of awareness to their IOLTA program by reaching a younger demographic than they had in the past.

The Equal Justice Coalition in Massachusetts began experimenting with Twitter over the past few months and has found the micro-blogging tool has been useful in gathering information in addition to distributing news. By following people and organizations on Twitter in their community, they quickly learn information they might otherwise miss.

Many social media tools make it easier and faster to share information, video, and photographs. The Equal Justice Coalition has successfully used Flickr, a photo sharing web site, to disseminate photos of their Walk to Hill event to the media, partner organizations, and participating law firms. YouTube, a video sharing web site, is another social media platform that is an easy way for IOLTA programs to share their videos with anyone who may be interested. While most IOLTA programs have not yet created their own blogs, most programs contribute content to their bar association or other related blogs, utilizing another popular social media tool.

How do we get started?

Since most social media tools are relatively new in the professional world, most social media users suggest you begin by spending some time listening or looking at what other similar organizations are doing online.

"Log on to some of the social media sites, play around, and begin to understand the culture of each to see how they can work for you," said Catherine Sanders Reach of the ABA Legal Technology Resource Center.

Reach recently presented a session at the Winter 2010 IOLTA Workshops on the most popular social media tools for IOLTA programs and how to get started with them. Most social media tools require a simple, online process to create an account with a login and password.

"Pick one or two that you can handle and manage effectively," Scruggs says as you begin your entry into social media. She was surprised at how easy it was to get started with Facebook and Twitter, and her colleagues have said the same thing. At the Montana Justice Foundation, young volunteers with AmeriCorp Vista are credited with ushering the program into social media.

Often in small organizations one staff person is designated to serve as the person in charge of social media efforts and is responsible for keeping content fresh and monitoring posts and tweets. While there are concerns about privacy and inappropriate posts or comments, there are several resources to help design a social media policy that works for your particular organization.⁵

Building a list of "fans"⁶ or "followers"⁷ on Facebook and Twitter initially relies upon traditional methods of publicity like, your newsletter, web site, e-mail signatures, etc. Once you become a fan or follower of others, it is generally viewed that they, in turn, will reciprocate and follow you or become your fan. Many social media users suggest not to be overly concerned about the quantity of fans or followers you may have, but to concentrate on the quality of the interactions.

While she says she might have spent a few more hours researching the difference between "group," "cause"⁸ and "fan" pages on Facebook at the outset, Amy Sings in the Timber with the Montana Justice Foundation, cautions new social media adopters, "not to spend a ton of time contemplating the right one, because it will pass you by." The next wave of new social media tools is always on the horizon.

Kimberly Schmitt is the Communications Manager for the Texas Access to Justice Foundation and the Texas Access to Justice Commission. The [Texas Access to Justice Foundation](#) created a Facebook fan page and a [YouTube channel](#) last year.

¹ To learn more about social media, please visit <http://www.slideshare.net/PrimalMedia>

² A Facebook Page is a public profile that enables you to share your business and products with Facebook users. For more information, please visit <http://www.facebook.com/advertising/?pages>

³ Twitter is a micro-blogging site where users can send out short 140-character messages ("tweets"). Users can also become subscribers ("followers") of your posts ("feed"). To learn more, please visit <http://www.twitter.com>

⁴ Facebook Groups can be created by any user and about any topic, as a space for users to share their opinions and interest in that subject. Groups can be kept closed or secret, whereas Pages are intended to help an entity communicate publicly. For more information, please visit <http://www.facebook.com/help/?faq=13622>

⁵ To learn more about social media policies, please visit <http://mashable.com/2009/06/02/social-media-policy-musts/>

⁶ Facebook users who add your Page to their profiles.

⁷ Subscribers of your posts on Twitter.



⁸ [“Causes”](#) is a Facebook application where members create a “cause”, a group focused on an issue they care about, and then pick an existing nonprofit organization as their beneficiary. To learn more, please visit <http://apps.facebook.com/causes/about>

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