

It's not the tool. It's YOU!

Steve Matthews | November 2008

I sometimes get asked silly questions like “which social network is the best?” or “which is better for law firms, content marketing or email newsletters?”

I find these questions silly, not because lawyers shouldn't make value judgments on where to invest their time and money, but rather, that questions like these can inspire thinking in exclusionary terms. That one web tactic or service is vastly superior to its competitors, or that personal experimentation should be abandoned. Here's the simple truth: it can't.

Most law firms wouldn't purchase a software package without a trial test period, and by the same notion, the majority of web services out there require some level of testing for personal fit.

For me, the concept of personal fit is absolutely crucial when it comes to selecting web-marketing tools and finding success. You need to be able to answer the following questions realistically and honestly. Is there a substantial peer group you can connect with? Is your target audience participating? Is one of your competitors the 800 lb gorilla that will eclipse your presence regardless of how much time you invest?

And most of all... Do you believe you can have an impact and stand out?

Going Big!

Anyone can join a social network or start a blog. We know that. So the question for many lawyers looking to engage these tools has now become: how am I going to do this in a way that makes me stand out? How am I going to make some noise?

Consider the following scenarios:

- You've joined JD Supra, but you've only contributed a handful of documents. So now, what's stopping you from getting on the top-10 contributors list?
- You have an account on a couple social networks like LegalOnramp or LinkedIn. But what have you done to engage? Have you considered starting an industry group or mapping out a set of discussion issues? Stick yourself right in the middle of your chosen industry, and provide the required context for other participants. Social networks are great tools, but 'social' is exclusively a human concept.

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Admittedly, not everyone relishes the idea of 'making noise' online. As much as the general public may have a preconceived concept of the extroverted lawyer, I find lawyer introverts to be more the rule than the exception. That said, we all must live outside our skin sometimes. Living in an attention economy requires that we accept this attention, and that we put forward our best effort to stand out from the crowd.

Passion Over Hype

Once the experimental phase is over, and a decision made to go forward with a selected tool (or group of tools), not enough can be said about approaching your project with passion. Whatever direction a lawyer chooses, they must know their message, and back it up with an unquestionable love for what they do.

Language wise, marketing with hype may work for some, but it often comes off as contrived. Tapping into 'passion', however, is often a much simpler and authentic offering. Great industry conversations are rarely contrived, and put lawyers in the best possible position to showcase both their knowledge and personality.

Experiment Wide and Invest Deep

The trick of course is to know which services are worth a large time investment, and which are not. Unfortunately, I don't see a one-size-fits-all answer to the question.

Building a collection of web-services that will represent a lawyer's practice means knowing who the audience is, and how the two parties will connect. If a lawyer's potential clients are coming from Main Street rather than Wall Street, then using a blog to establish a strong regional presence will likely pay bigger dividends than an investing in social networks.

Another factor for consideration is individual comfort level. If you're going to spend significant time with any kind of web-tool, you need to like it – the feature list, the community, and ultimately the results.

I would also advise people to experiment with web-tools before making a project (and time) commitment. Not only will experimentation help create a wider digital footprint, which can have a positive effect on the search engines, but it also gives us good feedback for which tools are right for the job.

Timing for Adoption

My last consideration is timing for adoption. Each web tool has a limited window of opportunity, and the choice of when to participate can be really important. Early adopters tend to make an intuitive decision and wait for mainstream adoption; which can be a risk, as this may or may not happen. On the plus side, however, early adoption offers more flexibility, an open ground for staking your subject of expertise, and tends to deliver the biggest impact. Late adopters by comparison tend to become one of the crowd, and don't always get the same attention.

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Picking a time to participate isn't an easy choice, but most lawyers would benefit from getting involved sooner than their instincts tell them.

Parting Thoughts

Online participation has been a fundamental evolution in the way the modern web works. The most important decision we make is frequently not the web-tool we choose, but rather, how we participate. Personal fit, in my opinion, can make a huge difference. Especially if we consider that our 'time' is the biggest investment we make with what are otherwise mostly 'free' tools. Experimenting should never be considered a waste. Not only does it deliver more web-marketing opportunities and a wider link network to support search rankings, but it also brings a better understanding of the tools in question.

Lawyers with the greatest chance for web-success are passionate about their subject, enjoy participating, and the positive profile that it brings. They don't just sign up for accounts on these tools, but they participate within the infrastructure of the system, and most of all – they make noise!

This article was originally published on Slaw.ca.