

LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter: The Changing Face(s) of Social Networking for Lawyers

By Aviva Cuyler

One difficulty in explaining “social networking” is quite simply the challenge of language. In the buzz surrounding these new communications platforms, we’ve probably made everything just a touch harder to understand than it needs to be.

For example, take the phrase itself: “social networking.” Here’s how the online resource *Dictionary.com* defines “network”:

“...forming business connections and contacts through informal social meetings.”

“...to cultivate people who can be helpful to one professionally, especially in finding employment or moving to a higher position: *His business lunches were taken up with networking.*”

“...an association of individuals having a common interest, formed to provide mutual assistance, helpful information, or the like.”

Begs the question: isn’t all networking by definition *social*? And yet, in order to give a label to the exciting world of LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, et al. we call it *social* networking – as though there’s a difference; as though you have to try harder to understand what it all means.

You don’t. Lawyers understand networking. Each of us might feel differently about when and how (and why) to do it, but we understand it. And if you understand networking, then you understand what these days goes by the name of *social networking*. However, today, instead of connecting with people after a speech at a local association or trade show, now you are less constrained by time and space. You can connect with the right people anywhere, at any time.

Learning how to use these tools isn’t really much harder than learning how to use Outlook or your office fax machine. (Conduct a quick Google search and you’ll find numerous helpful, step-by-step guides to getting started.) It helps to have an understanding of how the platforms have evolved over the past few years, and where they might be headed (one intention of this article). But, a word of advice: if you *really* want to understand social networking, lower your expectations and just jump in. Create a LinkedIn profile and connect to your colleagues; pay attention to what happens next, and participate. Sign up on Facebook and connect to old and new friends. Jump onto Twitter and find others with similar interests. Start with one platform; keep it simple; see how it goes.

(I say “lower your expectations” because time and again I’ve seen professionals of all stripes - not just lawyers - start using these tools and give up almost right away. “I don’t see the point!” Feels a little like disliking the telephone because it never rings. At the heart of it, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter have dramatically changed the way people connect and communicate with each other. In short, they’ve made it really easy to communicate, *and* to find the right people with whom to communicate. That’s the most important thing you need to know. When you start on each, give yourself enough time to actually connect. For some of us, that takes a while.)

Twitter: What are you doing right now?

Twitter taught us the importance of the status update – the answer to that question: “What are you doing right now?” Today, the ubiquitous status update is a central element to all social networks, but at first only Twitter did it well, or at all.

One of Twitter’s founders had been previously interested in emergency response communications – specifically, the ability for multiple parties to listen to and share information all at once, across a critical network. Makes sense that someone interested in how police and fire departments converse with key players during times of urgency would create a communications platform in which one person could announce what they are doing (ie, update their status)

and all other people connected to that person could immediately read and respond to the update (and likewise have their response read by everyone else, and so on).

Replace emergency response with the mid-2000s San Francisco social scene (tech hipsters comfortable with blogging and text messaging and the like), and you have a picture of Twitter's early users. The service allowed anyone with a computer or cell phone to answer that simple question: "What are you doing right now?" Networks of friends were strung together by allowing people to "follow" each other. If you follow James, you see all of his status updates. Helpful if you're planning on meeting James and 10 other friends after work for drinks. (James just got off the bus, and he'll be at the bar in 10 minutes. Emily is still at the office. Bill has just finished his first drink; he got there early.)

As a lawyer turned startup entrepreneur, I understand (and value) the way in which marketplace adoption can reveal what you have *actually* created. In the case of Twitter, among other things, they created a communications tool unparalleled in its ability to connect people across vast distances, and to share information almost instantaneously. As a consequence, today, if you are interested in gaining the attention of people online (and everyone, including lawyers, is interested in that), you could do worse than to participate on Twitter. Why? Simply because Twitter commands attention, including the attention of people lawyers serve. (That baseball fan who tweets from games also happens to be a CEO at a budding startup with a raft load of professional needs. Your friendship might begin with baseball; but it might quickly extend to the professional. That's how networking works.)

The jury might still be out about which came first, the chicken or the egg, but there is no question that Twitter and other social platforms have played an important part in information dissemination during revolutions in Iran and Egypt, among other places. Twitter has also been the first to announce breaking news (think: earthquakes) – and it certainly plays a part in shaping public opinion during elections. These are the exciting, newsworthy qualities of Twitter, and probably what piques your interest enough to read articles like this one. Fact is, the more mundane, daily uses of Twitter reveal why you really should be participating. Barring revolution and natural disaster, people turn to Twitter not only to learn what their office mates had for lunch, but also to know in a much broader sense: *what's happening*. They learn the answer to this question from their friends and also from trusted news sources. In this balance between friendship (connection) and news (communication), professionals of all kinds can insert themselves and become trusted, important sources in their fields of expertise.

I know lawyers who have extended professional awareness and influence by building networks of "followers" and sharing information that matters to those people. An entertainment lawyer shares insights about the music business to the indie musicians in his network. A tax attorney shares relevant information and insights with CPAs and financial planners (good referral sources for her line of work) that comprise her network.

What type of law do you practice? Whom do you serve? You'll find those people on Twitter.

Consumer-facing brands understand the value of both *listening* and *engaging* on Twitter. This lesson certainly extends to professional service, including legal service. By listening, you can see what really matters, right now, to the people and industries you serve. By engaging, you can let those same people know that you have worthwhile insights on the matters they care about. You can gain their attention.

(At JD Supra we realized early on that Twitter was fast becoming a source for news and information, shaped entirely by user's individual needs and interests. As a consequence, we began sharing content by subject – allowing anyone to follow legal news feeds they care about. Today, we see over 60,000 people on Twitter read and follow the legal work posted on our site. But the more to the point, we see the type of targeted attention I'm talking about above. Thousands of human resources professionals read Labor and Employment updates and alerts. Thousands of real estate professionals read that subject, sharing the work with their clients – and telling us as much.)

Twitter's early focus and simplicity is, in my view, one of its biggest challenges. As the site has grown, more and more people have connected to each other – also, more and more marketers have confused the difference between information and spam. Today, Twitter can be a noisy place; it can appear to be a waste of time. In the race to remain relevant and become the dominant social network, Twitter has re-shaped itself to help make sense of the vast amount

of connecting and sharing that takes place daily. Most recently, the site has focused on Lists as a way to compartmentalize people and information. Put your colleagues on one list, put your baseball friends on another. Put your legal news sources on one list, put your law school buddies on yet another. I think we can see more of this type of product development from Twitter and the other social networks. If the end goal is to sort through the noise and find what matters (to find the relevant signal), we all stand to benefit. (True not just of Twitter, but Facebook and LinkedIn, too.)

LinkedIn: Who do you know?

At time of writing, LinkedIn announced that it has passed the 100 million member mark. Yes, that's less than Facebook (500 million at last count) and Twitter (estimates put their numbers in excess of 200 million), but quantity isn't everything: LinkedIn is a focused, professional network. Lawyers, C-level executives, managers, decision makers and the like join it not to discuss baseball or favorite musicians; they join LinkedIn for business purposes.

For a profession built upon a stringent code of ethics, a considered need to mitigate risk, and (among other things) a reasonable inclination to separate business and pleasure, LinkedIn is the ideal network. As I said, the focus is business.

In its early days, the site's primary focus was to allow professionals of all kinds to create a profile something akin a digital CV. Because it was online and out in the open (and therefore indexed by Google), your LinkedIn profile became an easy way for people to know more about your professional credentials. What do you do for a living? How many years have you done it? What did you do before that? In which areas do you specialize? Where did you go to school? How have you been recognized for your accomplishments?

Google the name of someone you know, and if they have a LinkedIn profile it will in all likelihood appear on the first page of search results and answer those questions above, among others. Only, LinkedIn also answered another question (the question that turned it into a network): *who do you know?*

Every LinkedIn profile also lists the names of people to whom you are connected. A valuable first step to networking.

LinkedIn allows you to "connect" to others the way Twitter allows you to follow people. For some (including a number of lawyers I've spoken with), the value of those connections isn't always clear at first. "Why should I connect to colleagues in the firm?" I think such is the nature of networking, period. You don't always know why it is good idea to "connect" with someone (at a local conference, or a bar association meeting, or an industry event) until something good comes of it. If you keep to yourself – isolated by your unwillingness to connect – absolutely nothing will come of it.

A neighborhood friend trying to raise early funding for his startup told me how he recently identified a good investor for his business. He needed to find a way to meet that investor. A search on LinkedIn told him they shared a mutual friend (something he would never have known otherwise). Via LinkedIn he sent a message to the mutual friend and literally before the day was done this startup entrepreneur and investor had been connected and were discussing business.

LinkedIn grew on its ability to sustain professional networking, and then along came Twitter. Today, LinkedIn still stays true to its original intent, but the service has been enhanced by the ability to "share." Now, people on LinkedIn can post status updates ("I'm attending a conference") or share links to relevant news and information. The company has grown members' homepages into a robust source of business intelligence that reflects a) the activities and interests of people within their particular network, and b) the shared information that matters to that network.

LinkedIn embraces its role as a source of business intelligence. At time of writing, the platform's most recent offering is a feature called "LinkedIn Today" – a newspaper-like aggregation of the most-shared news from around the Web, organized by subject and industry. Additionally, late last year LinkedIn worked with my company, JD Supra, to launch an application ("Legal Updates") that allows professionals on LinkedIn to read analysis and commentary written by

lawyers and law firms covering their industries and relevant subjects. The app allows any professional to use LinkedIn to stay on top legal matters directly within the field of work – and it connects lawyers to the people they serve the most.

All three platforms understand that today, what matters most is the intersection of content and connections. It's not just who you know – it's also what you know. We can expect Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook to continue to fine-tune the features that deliver value in this regard.

Facebook: What are your friends doing?

According to the recent biopic *The Social Network*, Facebook original purpose was simply to be cool. (Certainly not to be the online marketing juggernaut it has become today.) It is a sentiment that colors the site to this day. Earlier iterations of Facebook shared many of the same functions and features as LinkedIn. You could connect with people and let them know a little about yourself – except, those people tended not to be colleagues and clients, but *friends*.

In the early days, Facebook did allow for status updates (as well as photo and video uploads, “notes” which are something like in-house blog posts, and other such shared content), but the platform existed in what was termed a “walled garden.” Only people you had approved as friends could see your profile and what you shared there.

With the rise of Twitter, Facebook fine-tuned its offerings – which, for some privacy hawks, is a nice way of putting it. The walled garden came down, to be replaced by a more Twitter-like openness in which everyone had access to everyone else's status updates (unless you opted to be more private about your activities, which was no longer the default).

Facebook's great strength is the number of users that gather there (over 500 million at last count) and also the almost-addictive way in which it appeals to people's voyeuristic tendencies. Twitter is functional; Facebook is entertaining.

In a world in which online attention is important but hard to come by, the Facebook “news stream” became a critical piece of real estate. Brands know this. Daily around the globe, people check in to Facebook (yes and LinkedIn and Twitter) to see what their connections are doing. The power of the platform is that it shows us a daily aggregation of who is doing what (dating, eating, traveling, watching, reading, loving) and how they feel about it.

Over time, Facebook has managed to balance openness with its early “walled garden” approach by re-launching its Page functionality. Pages now stand apart from Profiles; the latter being more personal, the former being a solution for professionals. Originally, Pages existed as static destinations (static because they did not include updates) where people could gather around mutual interest. They were called Fan Pages, because fans (of bands, TV shows, actors, etc.) tended to use them the most. With the rise of Twitter and the realization that businesses wanted to participate (they wanted to be “social”), Pages were fine-tuned to become broadcast channels for all types of interest, including corporations.

Today, this is one of the best ways for lawyers and law firms to consider a presence on Facebook. Everyone from Amlaw 100 firms to solo practitioners are establishing a corporate presence on Facebook by setting up a law firm page. The approach is exactly the same as on Twitter and LinkedIn: listen, connect, and engage. (Abstractions, to be sure, but as I said at the beginning of this piece – the easiest way to understand them is simply to jump in.)

Are your clients on Facebook the way they might be on LinkedIn? The sheer size of the platform (and other evidence) suggests yes, they are there. Are these people thinking about business while on Facebook? Too many people to generalize: some are and some aren't. But that father who “posts” pictures of his children skiing might also be a CFO whose life, like all of our lives, is a constant flux between the personal and the professional. There is no reason why you should not engage him on Facebook with information that matters to his business; if you don't, someone else will.

Facebook today is one of the single biggest drivers of attention to online news, period. Information is *the* currency in this “online ecosystem” – and every day we see a shift. What started in a college dorm as a way to be cool is now a juggernaut of connection and communication that questions the very foundation of what it means to separate the

personal from the professional. Lawyers and law firms are figuring out how to participate in this world in ways that are relevant and meaningful. And, frankly, I find it exciting, inspirational, and a pleasure to behold.

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