

Closed Networks & the Problem with Facebook

Steve Matthews | February 2008

This month's edition of Web Law Connected could be seen as a bit of a rant, but the honest intent here is to explore the underlying marketing value offered to lawyers by what has become the 800-lb-gorilla of social networks – Facebook.

It's difficult to refute that Facebook is the fastest growing entity on the web today, and the adoption rate within the legal community has been no different than any other group within the Facebook walls – it's expanding, and fast. While some law firms are guarding business productivity by blocking access, we've also observed firms who see this latest gathering spot as an opportunity to expand their online presence. It should be noted, anytime we find legitimate communities and discussion on the web, the chances are good that individuals looking for business development opportunities will soon follow.

However, the bigger issue for me goes beyond the website blocking debate, or whether there is a legitimate business community here that can be marketed to. But rather, if we compare the relative value of Facebook to all the varying forms of web marketing out there, is it a good use of a lawyer's online marketing time?

After a lot of consideration, and my opinion wavering, I've concluded that Facebook is a low quality marketing investment. And above all the positive aspects this service offers, the deciding negative factor was the closed nature of its network.

Similar to AOL or CompuServe back in the late-80's early-90's, Facebook is a closed community that prevents connection to the outside Internet. Original content placed within the Facebook system not only ceases to be yours, but sits behind a membership wall, and cannot be found by non-members or indexed by the search engines.

That's ok for the individual seeking to protect their personal privacy, but quite another for a lawyer looking to extend the reach of their marketing efforts. From my perspective, the big selling points of online marketing are the ability to extend the reach of your written content, build a permanent body of work that represents your practice, and to make the pieces work together.

Unfortunately with Facebook, that philosophy is completely out the window. And I refuse to treat

(Continued on page 2)

Steve Matthews is the Founder and Principal of Stem Legal, a company dedicated to bringing web visibility to the legal industry. A prolific blogger, Steve co-founded the Canadian legal blogging cooperative Slaw (www.slaw.ca), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy (www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog (www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com). Steve can be reached at steve@stemlegal.com.



Closed Networks & the Problem with Facebook

2

Facebook as a separate sub-Internet that must somehow be marketed to individually. The rationale simply isn't there. Why build up a body of professional work (articles, commentary, interactions) that no one will see outside of your Facebook friends?

It's this distinct lack of control over content exposure that dooms Facebook to failure as a primary marketing tool. And just like back in the days of AOL & Prodigy, that closed access philosophy is a difficult sell up against the innovation of the larger Internet. With a history that spans less than 15 years, you'd think the lessons of previously failed web-businesses would be painfully familiar. I continue to question why this time should be any different.

Now, I don't think we should discount Facebook entirely. I'm pretty confident the audiences and marketing prospects are legitimate. It could also be said that Facebook attracts those that may not be engaging the web otherwise. The lowest common denominator perhaps? :)

Tactics wise, I see nothing wrong with establishing a profile, and I still like the concept of feeding content from other sources (<http://www.slaw.ca/2007/09/11/the-secret-to-extending-your-20/>) *into* Facebook. But that's where I am personally drawing the line. Maintaining a presence in Facebook is not time intensive, and if it yields a couple new contacts annually, that's worth 15 minutes of my time. After that though, things are up for questioning.

Facebook –vs– Everybody Else

Another aspect I think a lot of people miss about Facebook, and this is a definite critique, is that they don't play nice with anyone else on the web. While importing and feeding content into their system is perfectly fine, pulling original content or contacts out of Facebook can get your account terminated. See Robert Scoble's temporary Facebook suspension (<http://scobleizer.com/2008/01/03/ive-been-kicked-off-of-facebook/>) as an example. And do note, if you or I had done the same thing, our accounts probably would not have been reinstated, and our time invested in creating content within the Facebook system would be lost forever – notes, statuses, forum discussions, in-system email - poof! Gone.

The Lessons for Lawyers?

I'm a big believer that online marketing efforts, especially relating to content creation, should be done predominantly on a lawyer or firm owned web property. Not doing so can put your marketing investment at risk. A much healthier relationship with Facebook would be to use it as a final content destination rather than a tool of creation.

It's ok to loosen up your vision of content control, commenting on another people's blogs for example, but when it comes to closed networks like Facebook – it's buyer beware. If you're not

(Continued on page 3)

Closed Networks & the Problem with Facebook

3

prepared to lose everything you've written, write it in a personal blog post and import it into your account (see the feed importing link above).

I would also strongly advise managing online relationships with more than one tool! There are lots of alternatives that can easily export and import contacts. Everyone should learn to do this anyway – even if you're taking a CSV export of your Outlook or Exchange – having backups are a must.

<RANT>

Finally, the thing that drives me completely batty about Facebook is that it's counter to everything the web is about. The Internet is a level playing ground unlike anything the world has ever seen – at least until someone tries to own it! Personal data control, privacy, intrusive advertising. The issues are all there for Facebook, and not unlike AOL before it.

I'm not the first to say this, and I won't be the last... I think we're going to see a Facebook backlash in 2008.

</RANT>

This article was originally published on Slaw.ca.