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COMMENTARY

Marketing Your Practice in 140 Characters or Less

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Social media has made the transition from time-waster to legitimate marketing tool. Professionals of all types have flocked to LinkedIn, Plaxo, Facebook and similar sites as a way of connecting with each other. The current rage among lawyers is Twitter, <http://twitter.com>, a free service that allows participants to publish brief text updates — known as tweets — that answer the question, "What are you doing?"

The concept is simple. A Twitter subscriber identifies someone whose tweets he wants to follow. Through Twitter's Web interface, a third-party desktop portal (basically a software program that organizes incoming tweets, such as TweetDeck or Twhirl) or a smartphone application, the subscriber receives that person's updates, which are limited to 140 characters each. Tweeting is similar to blogging, and following tweets is much like subscribing to a blog feed — but on a scale that encourages multidimensional conversations in a way blogging cannot. The character limit is the tradeoff.

Twitter can be a good marketing device for lawyers when used properly. The idea is to find and engage in conversations that showcase the writer's expertise and enhance her reputation as a thought leader, yet allow enough personality to shine through so readers can establish a personal connection. Those who tweet about topics of interest or who add value to others' posts will watch their list of followers grow. Those who are only out to sell or who write too often about what they had for breakfast will not.

My experience with Twitter began as an experiment in "live-tweeting" from a continuing legal education program. I was skeptical about whether anyone would notice, but I picked up some

followers as a result, and my readership continued to increase. I blogged about the experiment and mentioned the blog post in a follow-up tweet that said, "See the results of my experiment live-tweeting from an appellate CLE at <http://is.gd/2uwG>." This example illustrates the potential synergy between Twitter and other social media outlets.

For business development, Twitter is particularly effective when used to complement a blog focusing on the lawyer's practice area. Blogging provides an opportunity to showcase one's knowledge and writing skill and to develop a relationship with potential clients or referral sources through online conversation. Twitter allows the author to provide information about a given topic without investing the time necessary to put together a thoughtful blog post. The idea is to share something useful within the 140-character limit — perhaps a short analysis or links to news sites or blogs providing in-depth coverage — and make it easy for the follower to find more information if desired.

My Twitter readership has increased steadily since that experiment a few months ago, so much so that I now have more followers than blog subscribers. When Texas appellate issues come up in discussions outside my immediate network, my followers often mention me by name as someone to contact. Though difficult to measure in terms of revenue, that seems like a pretty good return on my investment.

Aside from my direct experience, recent developments illustrate that Twitter is more than a passing fad. First, back in September, the blog JD Scoop published a post entitled "145 Lawyers (and Legal Professionals) to Follow on Twitter," <http://is.gd/2poh>. It has been updated regularly since then and now lists more than 500 professionals who actively use Twitter. The post has been instrumental in building a sense of community among Twitter users writing on law-related topics and those interested in following them.

Another development involved a call for the "must read" blog posts of 2008 sent entirely through a blogger's Twitter network. The resulting entry at Three Geeks and a Law Blog, <http://is.gd/cv74>, contains a list of 173 worth-reading articles that could not have been compiled any other way.

Finally, solo and small-firm practitioners are not the only ones using Twitter. Several larger Texas firms have Twitter accounts. Although these firms tend to use Twitter primarily to issue press release-type announcements or client alerts rather than to engage in conversations, the fact big firms are using Twitter at all shows that firm management considers it a viable communication medium with a substantial upside.

Tread Carefully

Twitter's value is not apparent to everyone. Not surprisingly, it has naysayers. The most frequently expressed concerns involve the time required to use it effectively and whether doing so will reveal information that might be used against the lawyer or a client. More recently, commentators on e-discovery issues have warned that reckless tweeting may expose authors and possibly their employers to liability.

Anyone employing a new marketing technique should be concerned about the resources it consumes. The power of social media lies in its ability to connect people who otherwise would not cross paths, and it often takes time for those newly formed relationships to develop in a way that affects business directly. Depending on the type of practice involved, measuring Twitter's return with any precision may not be possible.

That said, Twitter can be a time drain. Posting takes hardly any time at all, largely because of the 140-character limit. But the number of interesting people to follow and informative discussions to get involved in is almost endless. The key is to know who to follow, who to ignore and when to shut it off.

Most concerns about Twitter are alleviated by using common sense and good judgment. If hours pass without any productive work, you need to put it aside. Although I am interested in what other lawyers are working on, revealing too many details is obviously a bad idea. And as far as legal liability goes, the rules should be no different than they are with texting, e-mail, blogging or any other form of electronic communication.

Before tweeting, I usually ask myself whether an appreciable number of my followers would find what I have to say interesting or helpful. If not, I try to refrain from hitting send. Adopt a similar rule, and most lawyers will be fine.

Austin solo D. Todd Smith is certified in civil appellate law by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization and relies on blogging and social media as his primary marketing tools. He has published a list of Texas lawyers and legal professionals active on Twitter at his [Texas Appellate Law Blog](#) and can be followed at twitter.com/dtoddsmith.