

How Law Firms #fail at Social Media

Steve Matthews | May 2012

It's no longer new or innovative for law firms to use Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn as elements of their public web presence. Social media tools have become sufficiently standard that we can probably declare 2012 the year firms finally "buy in" [<http://amlawdaily.typepad.com/amlawdaily/2012/02/report-law-firms-finally-learning-to-like-social-media.html>].

While early-adopter firms continue to fine-tune their offerings, what I'm really noticing these days is the critical mass of firms now playing catch-up. Lawyers who used to ask, "What's the firm across the street doing?" are now wondering "Why aren't we doing that?" Social media buttons are sprouting all over law firm websites, all over the web. The tipping point may finally be here.

I touched on these themes in my 2012 predictions column [<http://www.slaw.ca/2011/12/19/web-law-predictions-for-2012/>], leading to some thought-provoking questions from Slaw's resident tech-scholar John Gregory. John correctly notes the high volume of Twitter entries in law firm accounts, including the additional "noise" of self-congratulatory firm news, events, and other PR spin.

"Why," he asks, from a potential reader's view, "would one follow a law firm on social media? Compared to the focused commentary delivered by individual lawyers, what possible additional value can firms deliver?" And looping back to my original column's predictions of "social media failure," does this perceived lack of value qualify as a #fail?

Before we can talk about law firms' social media failures, we need to know what exactly we mean by "success." Experience has taught us a few things about successful participation online for both law firms and their lawyers. Success follows law firms that constantly consider and plan their *substantive message* and focus on bringing that message to an *audience* where it can resonate.

So what does failure look like? Here are three common examples, plus one that is often miscategorized as a failure, but that I don't think really qualifies.

A Little *Too* Social

Social media-driven relationships that are initiated or enhanced on substantive grounds have a stronger connection to the firm's business interests than those that don't. Some firms (and lawyers) stray too far from the business side of things in their Twitter accounts, reveling in online relationships for their own sake – they become *blindly social*. That's not to say friends and family don't have business value, but the best "business" relationships have focus. Lawyers need to consider the demographics: who sends them work;

(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.



who influences commentary; who shares industry “know how”; and who has common academic interests. Otherwise, as business people, they’re looking at a definite social media #fail.

The Right Place...at the Wrong Time

A worrying trend is the number of lawyers and firms new to online participation that fall into the trap of doing *nothing but* social media. Professional reputations are built on two critical pieces: personal relationships and demonstrated expertise (more on that in a minute). While the social networks shine at relationships, they fail miserably as delivery vehicles for original commentary. To make up for that weakness, in my view, firms need to get the order right. Substantive materials should *first* be published outside of social media – preferably on a firm-owned website with proper disclaimers, establishing ownership of the firm’s intellectual investment and expanding the firm’s base of authorship. Once these publishing routines are established, *then* those materials can be shared within social media. Of course, as we’ll see next, it’s impossible to do things in the wrong order when there’s...

Not Enough Substance

After personal relationships, developing a professional reputation online demands a commitment to writing commentary (demonstrated expertise), and I fail to see how social media escapes this element of necessity. Lawyers make varying choices in how to accomplish this: writing blogs, publishing articles, writing books, or developing CLE programs, to name a few. A reputation is built upon a body of work. For social media to play a supporting role, it must be grounded in substantive content created by an individual lawyer, or somehow connected to a lawyer’s practice. Lawyers can’t simply be linking machines, sending readers everywhere but to their own website; becoming nothing more than a distributor for other people’s content. As a business tool, social media without substance to back it up does indeed #fail.

Lack of Lawyer Involvement

I’ll spend the most time on this one, because I think it’s the part that’s so misunderstood and missed as an opportunity. There’s a line of thought that says law firm Twitter accounts fail when they do little but promote the firm: brag about awards, circulate press releases, and congratulate lawyers on their publications or achievements, but I’m going to differ here.

While it’s true that firm accounts are frequently cluttered, I’m not convinced their focus should be on communicating with clients and prospective clients. In my mind, the firm account is better suited as a homing beacon; as content infrastructure. Why? Because, as John Gregory’s comment suggests, people don’t follow law firms, they follow individual lawyers. And lawyer social media accounts, I would argue, are where firms develop and enhance relationships.

Think about it for a moment: unless a law firm has a very narrow, niche practice, it’s virtually impossible for a firm Twitter feed to be engaging and relevant to all clients, who potentially have hundreds of areas of interest and concern. But who knows, on a much more accurate level, what clients would be interested in? Who is perfectly positioned to generate a stream of relevant, useful tweets? Individual lawyers, of course. As

(Continued on page 3)

the old saying goes, people don't hire law firms, they hire lawyers.

I see the firm Twitter feed as a pool of abundant, high-quality, yet controlled, vetted messages about the firm, from which individual lawyers may cherry pick, passing along only the best to their readers, interspersed with their own tweets.

Add to this, the fact that an essential aspect of social media is reciprocity and interaction, something that corporate Twitter accounts often neglect entirely. But individual lawyers are more apt to develop the types of social networking relationships that aren't just one way, replying, retweeting, and passing along information and links from outside sources.

In summary, clearly, it's not healthy for any firm to be unidirectional in their approach to social media; we do, however, need to see the bigger picture – firm accounts and lawyer accounts must be considered collectively, not as separate entities.

The “official” firm Twitter account must play a number of important roles, each with inherently different audiences, including:

- Informing and enticing media coverage
- Recruiting new lawyers and staff
- Developing and enhancing overall market presence
- Supporting and seeding the Twitter accounts of individual firm lawyers

I suspect that if we start to recognize that law firm Twitter accounts have more than one audience and more than one goal, we will stop being so quick to say their social media attempts #fail.

What do you think?

This article was originally published on Slaw.ca.