

# Injection Marketing Undermines Credibility

Steve Matthews | July 2010

If there's one lesson lawyers really should learn about participating in online communities, it's this: *how* you contribute to a conversation is at least as important as *what* you contribute. Those who don't appreciate this guideline run the risk not just of seeing their comments ignored, but also of earning a bad reputation that's hard to shake.

I'm thinking specifically of lawyers who engage in strafing an online conversation, scattering self-promotional marketing messages at each landing point. They're newcomers with some credibility in the marketplace, but have little invested in any specific virtual community. So they charge in, market, and retreat. They demonstrate a repeated inability to provide views or opinions without shining a light on their own product or services.

To be clear, these are not spammers — they're participants who could become welcome additions to the community with some substantive contribution. But the result of this practice, a real problem for most online communities, is serious damage to their reputation. There's probably a great phrase for it that I haven't heard, but I call it "injection marketing."

And honestly, it's tough to watch. Credible individuals, sometimes with years invested developing their professional reputations, succumbing to the temptation to "over plug", and doing real damage to their online personas. An analogy could be drawn to the salesman-at-a-cocktail-party, but this isn't nearly as isolated or short-term.

In tolerable cases, the links or highlights I'm describing are embedded within legitimate pieces of commentary. Imagine a great blog comment – on-topic, insightful, or perhaps reflecting on an interesting situation – but tails off with a paragraph describing how to contact that person's company. As online readers, we're getting used to looking past "link drops" because the writer is sharing something of value; but that doesn't stop us from forming negative opinions.

Here are a few more examples:

- Finishing *every* blog post with a profile paragraph: "For more information on X services, visit our website, or call now!"
- Blasting a newsletter into a discussion forum or listserv – the content may be both relevant and interesting, but the push tactic is rarely appreciated.

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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](http://www.slaw.ca)), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy ([www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog](http://www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog)) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog ([www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com](http://www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com)). Steve can be reached at [steve@stemlegal.com](mailto:steve@stemlegal.com).



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- Monitoring Twitter conversations for related discussion, and then jumping in with a link to your service or product. *Bonus:* As a lawyer, it's quite possible this behaviour can also be considered solicitation, and offside with most ethics guidelines.

Don't get me wrong; marketing is going to remain a part of our web conversations. There's nothing wrong with plugging a great project or achievement on occasion; and sharing professional news is one of true benefits of online participation. But a little discretion and balance are definitely required. The *injections* I'm referring to are not only frequent in number, but all too often done without adding anything of value for the audience – only a minor “quality bump” above spam.

So why does this happen? There are probably lots of theories out there, but here are a few of my own to start:

- **We're not used to “paying it forward”** – Contributing without an expectation of immediate return is a difficult concept to get our heads around. So many of the benefits of online participation are one-off (or two-off) situations, and tangible results aren't always neatly packaged in a cause-effect arrangement.
- **Mixed messages for novice participants** – Professionals are told the Web is a gold mine for business development. But they're rarely warned about mixing advertising with web conversations. For any individual over forty who has spent their lifetime being “*advertised to*” rather than being “*conversed with*,” which approach is most natural for them to adopt?
- **Not seeing the big picture** – There's a tendency for some people to view each web contribution as a separate entity, rather than as part of their larger body of work. They're looking to maximize each spot where they “touch down”; and can't “waste the opportunity” that visitors won't know about their services.
- **Lack of a quality home** – Where do you send people when they want to review your products or services? If your website isn't something to be proud of (or is ineffective), marketing tactics tend to become more aggressive. Rather than doing business on their own website, the “injection marketer” brings the business to them – no matter how inappropriate.
- **'Pure laziness'** – Can't discount this one! Do you take the “diet and exercise” approach, devoting years to establishing a personal web presence – where people can't help but come across you or your work? Or, do you piggy back off the work of others?

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Within the legal industry, I see the second bullet a lot. Sometimes the inexperience factor is pretty obvious. Other times, it can be a lawyer who's been on the cusp of authenticity for years, but can't seem to mature beyond 1990s web marketing, *injecting* their quasi-spam materials wherever they go.

As noted in the first paragraph, this is damage that could be completely avoided. Most modern web tools allow us to link back to our home base – blog comments, Twitter accounts – everything's got a link these days! Not only is it unnecessary to “link drop” your way around the web, but if you're insightful or provocative, there's also every chance you'll attract an audience.

**Elephant in the Room – SEO:** For the more sophisticated “injection marketer,” the rationale for link drops often (and unfortunately) comes from my own industry. Better search rankings can be derived from acquiring more links to one's website. But no matter how many times we confirm that techniques like [comment spam don't work](#), firms continue to justify questionable behaviour under the guise of SEO competition.

**Simple question: Can firms compete in the search rankings without spam?** The answer is yes, but again we must consider the full chain of events, and not just simple cause-effect situations.

Those who converse online in an honest and natural way have a better chance of developing online relationships. Relationships with other web publishers drive link-based connectivity for people and companies, and greater link connectivity is a key measure of trust within the search engines. So, do you want better search rankings? Keep your on-page message clear and on-topic, and develop more relationships.

Building credibility is not only good for your reputation, it's critically important for your SEO program, too.

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