

The Formal-to-Informal Rule of Lawyer Web Publishing

Steve Matthews | February 2009

One of the more interesting transitions the web has brought to legal marketing communication is the greater acceptance of informal lawyer commentary. Where formal business writing and legal analysis were once considered the only output for marketing materials, the advent of blogging, and now micro-blogging (i.e. Twitter), have allowed lawyers to create more approachable online personas, and to simplify legal writing in a way that appeals to a wider demographic of readers.

This trend of informal communication, while liberating in many respects, doesn't come without a few pitfalls. One that has become more evident recently, occurs with the automated routing of content between the different web services.

Through the use of widgets and RSS technology, it has become a common tactic to alert friends and followers when a new web publication has been released. An example of this, I auto-publish the headlines and supporting links for my latest blog posts into both my Twitter and Facebook accounts. Other examples might include:

- Routing Facebook status updates into Twitter;
- Publishing blog posts on your LinkedIn profile; or
- Displaying your latest JD Supra documents on a Facebook profile.

The point being, these tools exist and lawyers are wisely making the pieces of their profile work together. The ability to mix-n-match these tools, and to create new syndication routes for published content is increasing almost daily.

The Problem

Now, the emerging issue that I think lawyers should be aware of here, is the possibility of forgetting that these automations have been put into place. Think about an embarrassing or inappropriate tweet that gets displayed on your blog. Or perhaps you've had a sarcastic Facebook exchange that displays on your public timeline?

The possibility of displaying only a part (one half?) of a conversation, or an unprofessional exchange, is increasingly likely the more we mix our business and personal contacts. And when we start routing content from one web tool to another, it isn't a stretch to say: "we need to be careful".

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Should we expect a bit more latitude with our professional peers that are now included on these informal social networks? Probably. But my conclusion is that lawyers should also be putting some safeguards in place. As I've tried to allude to, applying some personal vs. business demographic boundaries to online tools would be a good start. The next step, in my view, is to make sure your content sources are routing properly, and preferably, from formal to informal.

The Formal-to-Informal Rule

One of the simplest strategies lawyers can use to protect themselves is to identify which tools they use; and then break them in two: one half being professional and formal in nature, and one half that are informal and conversational in nature. My formal-to-informal rule is simply that it's always ok to route formal commentary to informal and conversational web tools; but that unfiltered, informal, or conversational tools should be considered a place of final destination.

Let me give a couple of practical examples:

- Blog headlines & links are an excellent addition to your Twitter or Facebook accounts. In fact, they often inspire post-publication conversations.
- Displaying your raw twitter posts (aka 'tweets') or Facebook status on your blog's side bar, in my opinion, presents a risk.
- Filtering or aggregating discussions that takes place on Twitter, on the other hand (see: LegalTweets.com), can be incredibly insightful.
- Many lawyers will use Facebook for personal contacts and LinkedIn for their business network. Routing LinkedIn content to Facebook probably wouldn't present much of a risk. Moving Facebook timelines into LinkedIn would present more of a problem.
- Social bookmarking tools like Delicious.com give you the capability to auto-blog your entries each day or week. This can be a great tactic if you have a dedicated 'professional' account, or your bookmarks are exclusively 'on topic'. However, if your blog has a couple thousand readers, and they start receiving links to your favourite sports team? Probably not a great reputation builder.

Do we need a rule for this?

One consistency when it comes to the web, is that inevitably the tools will change. The web five years ago looked very different than it does today; and in turn, will look very different five years from now. Written commentary shouldn't get much shorter than 140 characters or longer than a white paper or book. And even if our perception about the formal-to-informal continuum of lawyer commentary changes in terms of social acceptance, we should still be able to place it onto this spectrum.

Do we need a rule? I have no clue if anyone else does. But it makes my life a little easier.

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