

Ten Tips For Building a Law Firm Publishing Culture

Steve Matthews | September 2012

If you've been paying any attention at all to the zeitgeist of legal web marketing the last couple years, you know that producing and publishing content is the best possible way to grow your online reputation. But "content, content, content" is so much easier said than done. Firms need specific strategies for building an internal publishing culture. Here, I've assembled a list of ten tips to do this.

1. Think inside the firm, but make it smaller

If your firm is bigger than say, a dozen people, the idea of coordinating publishing across the board is pretty daunting and not likely to be successful. The idea of "the Firm" is great for branding, and being seen as a cohesive group, but probably shouldn't be micromanaging subject or practice expertise.

That's why delegating content production to smaller groups within the firm — usually practice groups — is the most efficient and practical way to go. The number of people/egos/agendas is smaller and therefore much more manageable. Among his or her many other responsibilities, the role of the "practice group leader" or manager must be to identify and harness the expertise of group members; and then move that effort towards tangible publishing.

Practice plans should include 'publishing' as an annual planning deliverable, and revisit these numbers regularly. Consider adding these routines:

- Highlight successes and praise group members each month by including them on an agenda item during planning meetings.
- Get writing objectives into the practice plans. Review and grade those objectives annually.

Benchmark the previous year's numbers and then utilize them — not just in terms of tracking volume, but identify all the publishing locations that hold your audience's attention. Location matters!

2. The more the merrier

Not people, but ideas. Lots of people have no problem writing. The problem we hear time and time again? They get stuck on what to write about! Group-based writing scrums (a.k.a. brainstorming sessions) can be a fantastic way to *build lists* of topics or article ideas that serve writers well in those "I have to write something..." moments.

Worthy tip: Make these meetings enjoyable. Put the coffee on and set a challenge: "Once we get to 50 blog

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post ideas, we'll crack open these doughnuts". Get someone to write the topics on a whiteboard or flipchart. (No one's allowed to shoot down anyone else's ideas.)

3. Play it up

Internal marketing of writing success is critical, and plays a couple of key roles. First, it keeps everyone informed and in the loop on what other practice groups are writing about; second, it encourages a culture of recognition, which most people find encouraging. If someone's not already tracking firm-authored external publishing (they should be!), assign someone in marketing or the library the role of internal publishing curator, and have them assemble weekly or monthly roundups of firm-authored articles to run in the internal firm newsletter or intranet. This data can also be used for external marketing, for instance, in topical client newsletters or alerts.

When it comes to print vs. web publishing, err on the side of inclusiveness. Media really doesn't matter much these days anyway. More and more publications are adding online-only columns, and you'll find many print publications with exclusive content too. Put it on the list! Same goes for blog content. If a particular blog post gets lots of play in the social media or gets a ton of comments, that needs to be mentioned.

4. Keep it fresh

It's a given that students are tasked with a lot of writing assignments (if memory serves, mostly memos and ghostwriting articles for partners for which they'll never get credit). I encourage you to take advantage of their cheap time and eagerness to build profile by getting them in on as many publishing efforts as possible.

Students have the distinct advantage of lacking an in-depth and nuanced understanding of many legal topics. That's right, I said advantage! There's a good number of similarities between your students and your more sophisticated clients — which is obviously a prime target audience. Think about that: students think like your clients do! While your vision is blurred by the details, your students might just help steer you towards subject clarity!

Don't forget to get students in on topic brainstorming too. Create a positive tone where there are no "silly" ideas. One way to approach writing may be to have a student interview a more experienced lawyer on a particular issue, then write the article and share the byline. The result will likely be a client-friendly article, free of presumed knowledge. And the lawyer has imparted valuable expertise to the student.

5. Invest in youth

Yes, another item on students, or perhaps more relevant: your younger associate lawyers. Recognize that your long term goal is "to build a firm culture that supports regular writing and publishing". Like so many other changes in law firms, that won't happen overnight, and requires years of investment. The next generation of publishing lawyers, especially with respect to building online profile, starts with encouraging the regular routines of authorship early.

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Hopefully we're past the days of "associate blogs" being off-grid and anonymous for fear of job security. In fact, I would hope and encourage most firms to do an "about face" with respect to their associates' writing: Your rising stars had better be blogging or writing online these days, or else! The firm's market perception will be at serious risk of declining otherwise. Or from another angle, your "rising stars" aren't going to stay without the firm's support.

6. Pencil it in

For a bird's eye view of the group's publishing efforts, use an *editorial calendar* to keep tabs on who's writing when, what, and where. Include details like target length and whether the assignment is a routine one, such as a magazine column. Make sure everyone's got access to the calendar, whether it's in Outlook, Google Calendar, the intranet, or some other platform that all writers can access. (Bonus points if you can use the calendar to send reminders, too!)

Editorial calendars are a great organizational tool but they can also help to identify opportunities ahead of time. For instance, say amendments to important legislation will come into effect on a particular date down the road. Marking those details down now allows writers to prepare, gather supporting materials, and think about what approach they'll take to writing about the amendments.

7. Keep it SMART

We've all heard that goals are no good unless they're SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely. So just saying "We will produce more content" isn't going to cut it. There are all sorts of "smart" goals you can identify with regard to publishing. A few examples: create media targets, set publishing objectives, and identify where your competition is publishing (and question how effective that has been for them).

Make sure your firm has a great answer to the question: "Where do you want to be seen?". Because it does make a difference.

8. Make a list of the questions!

This is a common piece of advice for bloggers, but it serves well for any sort of writing. Have lawyers (and staff, for that matter) keep a list of questions they are frequently asked by clients. Create a fluid, shared document among your in-house team and schedule yourself a time to review and add to it.

Always ask yourself:

- What issues are keeping clients up at night?
- What are the hot topics related to your area of practice?
- Which fundamental questions get repeated every week (or every day)?

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9. Keep your enemies closer

Lawyers should get to know their individual competitors at different firms who write regularly on the same topics they do. Even better, get to know the *out-of-jurisdiction lawyers* who practice in the same areas that you do, but aren't in the office down the road!

Here's why. Good writers monitor their subject area. In much the same way that it's easier to write when you've got a topic, it's also sometimes easier to riff on a piece or post that someone else has written, especially if you've got something different/more helpful/insightful to say. Is there a tangent you can take and develop something new from?

There's truth in the saying that to be a good writer, you need to be a good reader.

10. Make it a team effort

There's no need for lawyers to work alone on publishing efforts. Don't forget to get help from all the non-lawyers at the firm. They're called "support staff" for a reason. Both the marketing group and library services are a natural fit to provide media monitoring services, or use web technology like email alerts or RSS to track key publications. And when it comes to actually drafting blog posts or articles, the law library is particularly well suited to help with citation checking, and if they're not doing it already, doing current awareness on new decisions and legislative changes.

Putting even just a few of these tips into practice should make a big improvement to your firm's publishing efforts. I'd love to hear others' thoughts on this — if your firm already has a creative, supportive, and productive law firm publishing culture, how did it get there, and how do you protect and preserve it?

[Lastly, a small note of thanks to my colleague and co-author of this piece Emma Durand-Wood. Each of us took a couple passes at the narrative, and the original list of ideas was generated during a great brainstorming session! Cheers!]

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