

Zen & The Art of Legal Networking

INSIGHTS & COMMENTARY ON RELATIONSHIP BUILDING WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL LAWYERS NETWORK

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Social Media - What Are Mid-Sized Firms Doing? Activities & Challenges

Following my LinkedIn presentation at our Annual Meeting, we had a panel discussion about what some of our law firms are doing with social media. I was joined by [Charles Wander](#) of Fladgate LLP in London, [David Ellenhorn](#) of Ogden Murphy Wallace, PLLC in Seattle, and Bill Holder of Clark Wilson LLP in Vancouver.



Because we had a rather in-depth discussion which I think raises some interesting points and questions I'd like to get your feedback on, I'll be breaking the post up into two - part one focuses on the social media activities that the firms represented on the panel are engaging in, and some of the challenges they've been faced with.

Introduction

Charles Wander introduced himself as a partner of [Fladgate LLP](#) in London.

David Ellenhorn introduced himself as a partner at [Ogden Murphy Wallace](#) in Seattle, Washington, and commented that although he's not directly involved in his firm's social media activities, he is up to date on them because he sits on the firm's management committee.

Bill Holder introduced himself as a partner with Clark Wilson in Vancouver, and added that while he considers himself a dinosaur when it comes to technology, his firm is very involved in social networking.

What are Firms Doing?

We started with the question of what the firms on the panel are doing in terms of blogging, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.

David: David said that his firm has had successful blogs in a couple of areas, including [municipal law](#) and [healthcare law](#). He wanted to talk about a new initiative that his firm is currently soft launching - the firm has an expertise in healthcare information technology. David mentioned that in the US, there is legislation with regard to electronic health records, which is encouraging doctors and hospitals to put patient records up electronically. With the advent of "Obamacare," the new healthcare regime in the US, there has been a lot of cutting-edge discussion with regard to these areas.

So Ogden Murphy has started [a microsite](#), with the idea that convergence of their blog, Twitter feeds, and other information dedicated to this healthcare technology practice, is of the most use to their clients. David said that the site is beyond the blog page, and incorporates social media as well. He said that there's [a Facebook page](#), [a Twitter feed](#), [LinkedIn group](#) and [blog feeds](#), along with a partner who's using his personal LinkedIn page to push out content. David added that in areas like these, that are highly legislative, the firm is finding most use of and getting the most value for social networking.

Bill: Bill said that Clark Wilson operates a blog on [Renewable Energy](#), has a legalist blog on the provincial [BC business website focused on employment issues](#), and has a [Canadian Trademark blog](#). They also have a [LinkedIn profile for the firm](#), and [a company Twitter account](#). They're in the process of [building their Facebook page](#).

Bill said that there are two things he wanted to throw out there that are challenges as they're developing their social networking policy. The first is the dynamic between the individual lawyers and what they're doing on social media (Clark Wilson has just under 90 lawyers) and the overall firm's interest in terms of what you might call branding. There's the additional dynamic of the age gap, and he said that they've found that their very young lawyers, who are well-versed in social media, take a very individualistic approach.

This leads to the second challenge, where younger lawyers tend to be much more willing to adopt in leads and interesting articles and materials, regardless of the source. They're raised in a generation where that's the norm, so they think nothing about pulling in an article that a lawyer in a competing firm has written because they think it's a great article. However, the older lawyers start to panic when they see this, because they think they're promoting a different law firm.

But to the younger lawyers, social networking is for everyone, and you'll be more appreciated and considered a valuable source if you're bringing in great materials, regardless of the source. Bill agreed that while there's some truth to that, there is the reality of competition. He's not sure how these challenges will be resolved, but they've started to be discussed.

Charles: Charles said that they're still in the early days of social media, and said that they refreshed Fladgate's website three years ago when they incorporated as an LLP, and they're using that as the building block for the rest of their connecting internally and externally. He added that they also have an intranet within the firm, which they use to move content to the website where applicable and vice versa.

In terms of social media, it's been his baby for the last few months since he's taken over the marketing portfolio. The firm is doing a number of things, including having a [LinkedIn page](#) and developing their [Facebook page](#), and he's been listening very carefully to the issue about how you link the different elements of social networks together, and which one should be the base station.

Fladgate also has a [Twitter feed](#), and although Charles said that the firm is currently using it to share items that are appearing on their website, he said that Twitter is fantastic for connecting with people and for law firms it's important to note that it's not just a tool to give links to your website. Twitter has to be a way of starting and perpetuating a conversation with the world at large, which does give rise to all sorts of issues, including the issue of legal advice and not being able to fit a disclaimer in 140 characters (That being said, I did receive an email over the weekend from a Twitter follower who said that the disclaimer option is possible if you either add a simple version to your bio or include a short link to your full disclaimer on tweets).

Social Networking Challenges

Since Bill had already raised the issue of challenges that his firm is facing in terms of social networking, I asked the other two panelists to add their thoughts.

David: David said that their involvement in social media has been very ad hoc because of the nature of social media, so they're now starting to consider a formal social networking policy. They don't have any consistency, and may not, in terms of branding, because they want their tools to be personalized to certain areas. He said that they're wrestling with the issues that Bill raised, along with the issue that Stuart raised in the previous session about adding disclaimers. Some members of his firm wanted to be very conservative and require a disclaimer on everything, but David said that this is unrealistic - not only on Twitter, but with everything else, and lawyers just need to use some judgment.

David added that they haven't had any trouble with young associates going rogue so far, because they have good associate relations, and said they haven't had people out there doing things they think are bad for the firm from a competitive perspective either. I asked him whether they'd been training the attorneys or monitoring their individual accounts, and David said that they have a very young, entrepreneurial executive director who is very much on top of this. All blog posts from the firm have to be vetted by partners.

Charles: Charles felt that this raised a number of interesting points, and said that their policy has long been that anything that goes out in the name of the firm has to go through a proper approvals process. This is coordinated by the marketing director. He said that what they're doing now is that anything going out on a social network will either be approved by him, their marketing director, or both.

Recently, a young partner won a case in the art world which got a certain amount of profile in the national press in Britain. He realized that this might be an interesting area and came up with the idea of writing a blog. He created it on his own using Google's Blogger and then came to the marketing director who brought him to Charles. They agreed that the blog looked great and said they would encourage him with it, but said that his content must be approved and he must add disclaimers in. They said that if the blog developed in the way that he wanted, they'd look at creating links under the firm's website.

Charles said he is very much in favor of people coming up with their own initiatives and testing the waters before putting the firm's name to it. He said they are concerned with consistency, but he does like the idea of not putting the firm's name to it initially.

We'll cover the rest of the session in tomorrow's post, but in the meantime, I was musing over some interesting questions as I listened to the session again. I'd love to get your thoughts and feedback in the comments.

Questions This Discussion Raises

- Do you think a firm's blogs should be consistent with the firm's general branding or not?
- Do you see microsites as being the future of law firm websites? Does narrowing your niche on the internet bring you, and potential clients, more value?
- The panelists mentioned the tension that exists between individual attorneys' social networking efforts and the firm's - how have you been dealing with this at your firm?
- Do you think that social media, when done under the umbrella of a law firm, even by an individual attorney, should take into account the issue of competition? Or is social media just about sharing information that you find valuable, regardless of the source?
- Do you have one social networking tool that is your "base station," or do you use many social networking tools equally? Is one more effective for law firms than others, in your opinion? Should you spread out your resources or focus them?
- What do you think about disclaimers and social media? Are they necessary or should attorneys and the public just use some judgment? Do you think bar associations will require these in the future?
- If someone at your firm is blogging under the firm name, is someone vetting the posts before they're published?
- Are you in favor of attorneys starting blogs outside of the firm's umbrella first to see if they're successful before linking to them on the firm's home page?

Are there any other questions you think the comments above raise that I didn't cover?

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