

Blogging for a City

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Important lessons can come from unlikely places: Mars and Venus, a block of cheese, or the end of the sidewalk. For law firms considering whether to start a blog—or wondering how to get an existing blog on the right track—we suggest looking to another improbable source of inspiration: a mountain top in South Africa.

One of us, Adrian, grew up in that country in the last throes of the apartheid era. His father worked as a journalist in Cape Town, tasked with chronicling the country at a fraught time in its history. Twitter did not exist, nor did Facebook, nor did CNN. The daily paper, sold from every street corner, was one of the primary news outlets available to Cape Town's citizens—a fact that increased the responsibility that came with being a reporter.

Adrian's father, a veteran at the paper, underscored the point to each newly hired reporter. He would send them to the top of Table Mountain, a steep-cliffed formation overlooking the city. He would tell the cub reporter to look down on the city below—the lit houses, the trafficked streets, the office towers of the business district. He asked them to keep a message in mind as they stood on the mountain, with all of Cape Town spread out before them: "All of those people are reading your work."

If that exercise did not give the reporter a sense of the importance of the job, nothing would. And while we hardly equate running a legal blog to operating an opposition newspaper during apartheid South Africa, the metaphor is apt in two

significant ways. First, blogs are first and foremost publishing endeavors—an obvious point, perhaps, but one too few firms keep in mind when making decision about starting and operating their blogs. Second, your audience is a community of real people, and they should be at the forefront of your thoughts when making editorial decisions.

These two observations will guide us as we detail the considerations that should go into the decision to blog or not—and, once started, how to do so most effectively.

Understanding the Challenge of a Blog

When deciding whether to begin a blog, do not let the trees keep you from seeing the forest. Yes, there are numerous details to consider in establishing a blog. But those details—involving choices over domain name, hosting services, layout, commenting options, and on and on—can quickly obscure the main issue and loom larger in the mind than they should. They do so in the way that an electronics salesman can muddy the issue for a couple looking at televisions. They stop at a window thinking they might want a set for the basement, and after 15 minutes with the clerk, they become wrapped up in thoughts about HDMI connectivity, comb filters, and scaling. They've lost sight of the question: Do we want a TV for the basement?

With a legal blog, the question is this: Do we want to start a publication?

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Blogging, after all, is nothing more or less than an easy form of publishing. Yes, there is undoubtedly a social aspect to this form of publishing, but when firms start blogs, they are committing to starting a small publication. The threshold questions firms should ask themselves, then, go to the issue of whether they can realistically, and successfully, make that commitment:

Do we have a viable subject?

Narrow subject areas (e.g., executive compensation policies, climate change regulation, securities enforcement) work very well for legal blogs—but any subject can do, as long as there is an audience interested in it. Though be realistic here, because if you have no Cape Town below you—that is, actual people in the real world interested in your subject matter—your blog will likely be dead on arrival. (Hint: Your law firm is not something people will take time out of their day to read up on. If that is your subject matter, go with an internal newsletter instead.)

Is this subject one that will serve business development goals?

The best blogs become an authoritative source of information for those interested in their subject matter. The business development benefit of a blog stems from that authoritative position; if an HR executive has come to rely on your blog for insights about the law of employee benefits, chances are good the executive will turn to your firm when she needs an attorney. This valuable relationship between the blog and its readers forms over time.

If the audience for the subject matter of your blog is large but constantly changing—imagine a Cape Town in which the typical resident stays only a week—there may not be time to develop that authoritative position in the mind of the reader. People who have suffered from medical malpractice, for instance, or litigants who have a potential appeal to the Supreme Court, are both large populations that turn over rapidly.

This does not mean that you shouldn't attempt to blog in those areas; it does mean, though, that you should be smart about it. The standard-setting Supreme Court blog, SCOTUSBlog, has become one of the legal blogosphere's most successful. And it has done so in a manner quite shrewd from a business development perspective. By focusing on deep analysis of Supreme Court issues and arcana, the blog attracts a stable population of academics and appellate lawyers that are most likely to be referral sources in the field of Supreme Court litigation.

Can we sustain a publishing schedule?

The best action for firms to take in determining whether they are prepared to blog is to create an editorial calendar covering at least three months. Laying out a schedule of posts, which should occur at least once a week (though preferably at least twice a week), will immediately give those considering the blog a sense of the work—and commitment—required. If the schedule does not look easily doable at the editorial calendar stage, you know all you need to know.

Do we have invested leaders?

Successful publications have leaders and so must your blog. Firms should consider whether the blogging team—including both marketers and attorneys—has at least one individual personally invested in the blog's success.

Think Like an Editor

If you're still reading, you may be on your way to running a blog. And once you're started, it remains vital to keep in mind that you are running a publication. While writing a valuable legal blog requires interesting legal thinking, being a good lawyer is not enough. The most successful blogs are those run with the sensibilities of a strong editor. Which means, in practice, the following:

Consider Your Audience

Editors think from the perspective of their audience, and then give that audience exactly what it wants. The editors of *CNET* give their tech-thirsty readers incredibly detailed reviews about the latest gadgets. The editors of the *National Enquirer* give their audience salacious, fantastical dramas from the celebrity landscape. The editors of *Good Housekeeping* deliver unfailingly practical advice on making meals, keeping a home, and looking your best.

If you know your subject, and the kind of prospective client you would like to be reading your blog, you should have a fairly good idea of the information that excites and interests them. Deliver it to them, regardless of whether the lawyer in you finds other legal issues more intriguing. Because, as an editor would point out, you are writing the blog for your audience, not yourself.

There may come a point at which your ideas dry up. If that happens—or, if you blog long enough, when that happens—don't despair. There are tools, such as JD Supra's trending topic reports, that can inform you about the most popular articles in a given topic area. Consult them. Or act like an editor would and read your competition (something you should do regularly); think of a fresh angle on their stories. Act like a reporter and solicit story ideas from those you know and respect in the industry you are covering. Better yet, send them five questions and run it as a Q&A.

Keep in mind, this isn't brain surgery—and, in fact, you've likely operated with this editorial mindset already. Law firms have produced client alerts and legal updates for years, certainly predating the online landscape. Those alerts were written to inform clients about issues pertaining to their business, their lives. That same type of substantive information, born of a firm's shared expertise, will get you noticed online because it provides genuine value to its readers. Keep this in mind when wearing your editorial hat as a blogger. Know what is useful

to your audience; know what keeps them up at night; bring to bear your expertise and write.

Know What You Are

A good editor has a strong vision of what type of content her publication provides. For some outlets, it is breaking news. During the financial crisis, many law firm blogs covered daily developments in the bank bailouts and passage of the Dodd-Frank financial reform bill. Some offer in-depth analysis of issues, while others curate news stories from around the web relevant to a particular subject matter, as Perkins Coie's Patent Law Insights blog does. Blogs can even be forums for advocacy. It is not important that a blog take any particular path, but it is vital that it takes *a* path and embraces an identity.

Develop a Voice

Law firms share a near-universal instinct to avoid taking public positions on issues or otherwise engendering controversy. While understandable—perhaps even advisable—this instinct should be tempered with the knowledge that developing a distinctive style or “voice” is necessary to attracting a loyal blog readership. Indeed, your blog's voice is the primary reason that readers will seek it out and keep it from being, for instance, just another bland FDA blog cluttering up the Internet. Without one, your blog may not be worth writing.

The good news for would-be bloggers is that while being loud and opinionated is one way to establish a voice (see, e.g., any cable news show), there are plenty of other methods. The best, especially for a blog written by multiple authors, is to create a “hook” or overarching concept that burns a personality into the DNA of the blog from the start. Ford & Harrison's wildly successful employment law blog, called “That's What She Said,” is built on a simple formula: each Friday, it analyzes employment law issues raised by the antics of the characters on NBC's *The Office*. The blog's very framework makes it a fun and engaging read,

without requiring Ford & Harrison to get opinionated.

Similarly, readers of the new Basis Points blog know immediately that Bracewell & Giuliani's take on restructuring is going to be fun as well as informative. A central feature of the blog is its weekly haiku from the world of finance (example: My bonus was great / Huh, your bonus was higher? / I am so pissed off), which, paired with the blog's wry headlines and colorful bios, makes you want to stay awhile.

Humor isn't the only avenue to developing a voice. Blogs that allow writers to color outside the lines of strictly confined issue areas give their authors the chance to connect with their audience on a deeper level. A heartfelt post on cyber-bullying on Sheppard Mullin's Social Media Law Update, for instance, spread across the web to a large number of people—some of whom will become regular readers of the firm's blog.

Market Yourself

This final point may require thinking like a marketer rather than an editor, but it's one worth mentioning. The best marketing for a blog lies in delivering valuable information and following the steps above. Delivering unique content on a regular schedule—an industry Q&A every other Monday, a breakdown of industry news every Wednesday, a lighthearted Friday feature—will help to make your blog “appointment reading.” Joining the larger conversation can also establish your reputation. Judiciously commenting on top blogs in your issue area or offering to write guest blog entries for others is a great way to pull readers back to your site. Other touches, like creating business cards for your blog, including a link to the blog in email signatures, spreading links to your posts via Twitter and LinkedIn updates, and syndicating your content through JD Supra or Bloomberg Law are all inexpensive steps that will have high impact with your closest contacts.

Those contacts are the people living right on your street in Cape Town. Knock on their doors and let them know what you are up to. Beyond them is a city of people interested in the industry or topic area you are covering. Stand on the mountain and think about what drives them. If you do that well enough, for long enough, in time they'll all be reading your paper.

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