



Feature Story

Written by Timothy A. Perkins

Twittering for Attention

Bill Haltom's But Seriously Folks article in July's *Tennessee Bar Journal* ("A Time to Blog") mentioned something that got me thinking. How many Tennessee lawyers are using Twitter? A large number of professionals reject Twitter and other Web 2.0 phenomena as a fad without understanding how powerful such tools can be. It's not about what others are saying, but what you are saying. People are clamoring – no, they are Twittering – for information. And if you don't supply it, someone else will.

Although I've heard others describe Twitter as everything from "micro-blogging" to "elevator pitch," I prefer straightforwardness to ambage. Twitter is a Web site where you can post anything that you can fit in 140 characters or less. For a point of reference, the first sentence of this paragraph, including the spaces and the ending period, is exactly 140 characters. The character limit imposes brevity, a laudable art unfamiliar to many in our profession. Within the 140 characters, you can post your thoughts, links to Web sites,[1] links to articles, links to pictures, etc. As you tweet you will amass "followers," or people who regularly read your tweets.[2] Likewise, you may decide to follow others, such as friends, news outlets or other attorneys.

So how is this helpful to attorneys? For starters, Twitter provides you with a free avenue for marketing your skills, your personality, and your interests to others. Have a new article or a poignant thought that you wish to share with the world? Tweet about it. Read a good article that explains something better than anyone else has? Post a link and short description. The more valuable the information you provide, the larger your following will grow.

Posting high-value content inevitably leads to more followers because people will share or "retweet" your message to their followers. If something you tweet intrigues someone enough, they may share it with others who may also begin to follow you. And having more followers naturally means more people will hear your message.

This alone should be enough to encourage you to try Twitter, but that's only the beginning of what Twitter can do. Here are a few of Twitter's strong suits and some helpful information to help get you started.

Hitchhiking on the Information Highway

Twitter is a terrific source of information about the law, especially breaking news. But like any other type of research, you must look in the right place to be efficient. The best way to stay informed is to follow others – Twitter calls these your "friends" – who can scour the Internet for you. Twitterers such as Attorney Tyson Snow[3] comb the Internet for breaking news. Snow and others like him provide a wealth of information on the state of the law. For example, he regularly links to articles of considerable importance for employment lawyers. Another Twitter user, @LexMonitor,[4] provides a veritable smorgasbord of legal news. Whatever your palate prefers, chances are that someone is tweeting about it.

And it's not difficult to find information. For instance, a quick search of the phrase "Tennessee Law" revealed several things, the first being that the Scopes Monkey Trial began on July 10 (the day of my search)[5] in 1925. Many are also Twittering about Tennessee's new bill allowing firearms into establishments that serve alcohol. The point is that simple searches like this can reveal not only interesting topics, but the people who regularly tweet about them. To stay informed, pick a few good sources and start following them. Make sure to review profiles carefully to see what your prospective "friends" normally tweet about so that you can avoid spam. Even though Susie Tweeter found the Scopes trial interesting enough to tweet about it, her daily fare may consist of utter banality, such as what time she let her dogs out, etc. Clicking on someone's profile at Twitter.com will reveal their most recent tweets, which allows you to screen potential spammers before deciding whom to follow.

Once you have a few interesting friends, there are programs – such as Tweetdeck or Seismic—that allow you to filter people into groups. It's a good idea to categorize your friends to separate acquaintances from research. The group functionality of these types of programs makes this a cinch. By ciphering out a few choice friends and organizing them into groups, you can assemble efficient teams of researchers that scour the Wweb for you and bring news articles, cases, and other topics of importance to your desktop on a constant basis.

It's Trendy!

Another benefit of using Twitter is its ability to harness social awareness into an accessible format. Take for instance the 2008 earthquake in China. Because of Twitter, Kevin O'Keefe –attorney and founder of LexBlog – was able to learn of the earthquake only moments after it happened, before the traditional media began reporting it.[6] O'Keefe learned of the earthquake on Twitter, and searched for more information using a site called Tweetscan, which allows users to monitor discussions by key word, such as "earthquake." What he saw was a stream of messages from people in China reporting on

the incident.

Twitter automatically tracks topics like this using “Trending Topics.” To understand how trending topics works, consider the untimely death of Michael Jackson. As the Twittersverse became abuzz with news of Michael Jackson’s death, Twitter’s home page soon showed “Michael Jackson” in the trending topics, which appear in the right hand column once you are logged into Twitter. This let others know that people were mentioning the phrase “Michael Jackson” with such regularity that Twitter detected a trend. All that is necessary to see what others are saying is to click the link for the trending topic. This will bring up a list of the most recent tweets worldwide that have mentioned the topic.

Tips for New Twitterers

1. Be professional – the world is watching!
2. Remember that your communications are viewable by the whole world. Nearly every social media Web site archives your conversations for the world to see and to search. Because of this, you should apply the same level of scrutiny to your tweets as you do to client communications. Moreover, it’s nearly impossible to keep your social life separate from your professional life in the online universe.
3. Tweet meaningful information, regardless of where you find it.
4. Solomon wrote in *Ecclesiastes* that “there is nothing new under the sun.” While technology has changed the paradigm a bit, it’s no less a truism today: Somebody else has probably already thought about it or said it before you. That’s a liberating thought! There is no need to reinvent the wheel if someone else has already written on a topic. That’s not to say that you could not say it better, in which case I would recommend your own blog post to expound, clarify, etc. But retweeting is a powerful tool that some ignore for fear of giving credit to someone else.
5. People could care less about private conversations – that’s what e-mail is for!
6. Twitter limits you to 140 characters on purpose. Don’t circumvent this using multiple tweets.
7. You lose nuance in 140 characters so be careful.
8. You can’t retract what you say; you can only apologize for saying it.
9. Spam is spam. If your twitters are always meaningless, you’ll lose your followers
10. Join a Twitter directory such as Wefollow.com. Directories work much the same way that the Yellow Pages work. Find your particular area of expertise and list your name.

Notes

1. You may shorten URLs (links to Web sites) by using Web sites such as <http://tinyurl.com> or <http://is.gd>.
2. Some people also call your followers “Tweeps.”
3. <http://twitter.com/tysonsnow>. See also <http://twitter.com/LexMonitor>, <http://twitter.com/WSJLawBlog>, and <http://twitter.com/LegalBlogWatch>.
4. <http://twitter.com/LexMonitor>
5. See http://twitter.com/HISTORY_Daily/status/2568345912
6. See <http://kevin.lexblog.com/2008/05/articles/social-networking-1/impact-of-twitter-demonstrated-with-news-of-earthquake-in-china>, for Kevin’s O’Keefe’s story.



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TIMOTHY A. PERKINS is a counselor and litigator in business law whose practice focuses on employment law, education law and construction law. He represents clients in both federal and state courts, as well as in administrative law proceedings before various state and federal administrative bodies, such as the Tennessee Department of Labor, the Mississippi Workers’ Compensation Commission, and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. He is licensed to practice in Tennessee and Mississippi. Perkins has also recently been admitted to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals where he had the opportunity to argue an issue of first impression before the court. You can follow Tim’s musings on his personal blog at <http://www.timperkins.me>.

