

Social Promotion

Social network sites work for you, but only if you work at them

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By G.M. Filisko

See also, "[The ABA Gets Social.](#)"

As Scott Sigman rattles off some of the online social networks he's joined, it's plain he's a true believer.

"MySpace was really the first. It's for the younger crowd, but it's OK," says the associate at Bochetto & Lentz in Philadelphia. "Friendster is pretty much dead in the water. LinkedIn and Facebook are the two most popular, and Facebook is unbelievable. It has many of my attorney colleagues and high school and undergraduate friends. It's an amazing way to connect with people from my past."

Sigman has joined just about every online social networking site he can find. "I have pretty much an identical profile, with the same photo and bio on all," he says, referring to a snapshot that plays off his Philadelphia roots by featuring him in a business suit while sporting vibrant red boxing gloves, *Rocky*-style.

Sigman is constantly working the sites to build more contacts that he hopes will bring him new business.

"My LinkedIn connections are probably near 1,000," he boasts, "and I have about 965 friends on Facebook."



Scott Sigman
Photo by KBPictures

It's paying off, according to Sigman. "I get numerous requests for representation through LinkedIn and Facebook—at least 20 e-mails a month between the two sites," says the former Philadelphia assistant district attorney. "I bring in an average of three to five cases a month from

those contacts, whether it's a driving-under-the-influence criminal case, civil representation or someone asking for a referral.”

That adds up to \$20,000-\$100,000 in legal business generated through online networking each year. “That's cases and referrals for work on an hourly basis,” says Sigman. “On contingent fee cases, it could be in the millions. It's an unlimited number.”

Sigman is an outlier, as they say in the statistical world, in both his involvement with and enthusiastic endorsement of social networks. But the two ends of the continuum of opinion about social networking can be seen in the statistics he rattles off. Five- or six-figure payoffs ain't hay, many lawyers would say. But take in the effort to keep up with 2,000 or so contacts, and your yearly harvest divides down to between \$10 and \$50 per contact, others might argue.

VARYING DEGREES OF ACCEPTANCE

The appeal of social networks is undeniable, but their business value—especially among law firms—is a matter of debate and, in certain ways, generational divide.

Are social networks worth it? How much time, effort and money must be spent to maximize their potential? And what is the reward? In the end, the answers vary depending on what you do online, how you do it and why.

According to the ABA's annual *Legal Technology Survey Report*, only 15 percent of respondents say they've joined such a network.

“I have absolutely no interest in people I don't know saying they want to be my friend,” jokes Gary Griffin, chief, General Law Bureau, Illinois Attorney General's Office. “It's not like I haven't looked at these sites, but the fact that Kelly from Arkansas wants to be my friend —what do I care?”

In between Sigman and Griffin, there's a middle ground of attorneys who've loaded their profiles onto at least one social networking site because doing so is generally free. For some, the network profile has drawn modest business.

“It's generated about \$5,000 worth of business to me, which on an annualized basis isn't so much,” says Patrick Tracy, a solo patent attorney in Kensington, Md., of his memberships in LinkedIn and Facebook. “It's another significant advertising opportunity, and it's always there. But it's not going to be a panacea for anybody.”

For others, uploading their profile is as far as they've gone. They've decided not to join as many sites as Sigman, nor have they spent the time he has in building connections. They offer up many reasons: Online social networking doesn't generate business. It's time-consuming. It's confusing. It's invasive. It's not professional. It's just for socializing among the younger crowd.

Many attorneys made the same arguments about e-mail and websites just 15 years ago. Technology experts say the naysayers are wrong again.

“The impact online networking sites are having on the legal world is only beginning to be felt,” says [Robert Ambrogi](#), a solo attorney and technology writer in Rockport, Mass. “At this point, you’ll find a lot of the usual suspects on all the sites, but the sites haven’t come to the point of having widespread application. That time will come, however, because interest in them is growing.”

[Denise Howell](#), a tech-savvy sole practitioner who specializes in intellectual property and technology law in Newport Beach, Calif., says social networks are important to the legal profession today, “yet not too many attorneys are participating in them. That’s a function of generational forces. People coming out of law school today are very steeped in this. As those people come up and begin managing the biggest law firms, you’ll see this communication become commonplace.”

For the uninitiated, let’s back up and define our terms: Online social networks are website communities that allow members to post profiles of themselves with the goal of meeting others with similar interests, whether it’s a niche legal practice or fly-fishing.

“It’s like a phone book,” says Ambrogi. “But you have unique control to build your profile, so it’s really powerful.”

The big names include [MySpace](#), which many people consider to be youth-dominated and nonprofessional; [Facebook](#), which has a mix of young and older, and personal and professional, members; [LinkedIn](#), a business networking site; and the invitation-only [Legal OnRamp](#), which bills itself as a site on which in-house counsel and law firm attorneys can share opinions, research, work product and other information.

Just launched is the ABA’s social and professional networking site, [LegallyMinded](#), which allows not just lawyers but all legal professionals—including paralegals, law students and professors—to share information, create groups and connect with others with similar interests. (See “The ABA Gets Social.”)

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Each site has benefits and drawbacks. “Facebook and MySpace are really 90 percent social,” says Suzanne Hawkins, former chief of practice excellence at the recently dissolved Heller Ehrman in New York City. “The benefit is that if your entire group of contacts is using these sites, you can socialize with them and their contacts. But they’re not really built for business networking.



Suzanne Hawkins
Photo by Matt Carr

“For instance, in Facebook [sometimes] you have to be invited to be someone’s friend to see that person’s profile. If I wanted to use it to network, nobody could find me, which makes using it somewhat complicated.”

“If you’re looking for business networking,” continues Hawkins, “you may need to go to LinkedIn. It’s a very good and active site, and it can be very useful if you’re looking for a position, trying to find your contacts or researching companies you want to work with.

“And it’s not just for lawyers. You may have connections with a former college [acquaintance] who’s now the CEO, the chief financial officer or head of human resources at a company. That could be beneficial for networking, but also for developing business.”

But many lawyers question the utility of lawyer-to-lawyer sites, perhaps because none has yet to catch fire.

[LawLink](#) appears to be the strongest, with its 4,000 active members posting profiles and attorney employment positions. However, many parts of the site are outdated: The most recent post in a recent visit to the law marketing forum was added on Nov. 14, 2007. And there’s never been a post in the ethics forum. When contacted to ask about their membership in LawLink, several attorneys didn’t return e-mails or were no-shows for interviews.

Another issue is that many attorneys actively involved in online social networking have never heard of the lawyer-to-lawyer sites. “I’m not even familiar with them, and I’m pretty Internet-savvy,” says Jason Trumpler, a solo with offices in Texas and California who’s had success networking on MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn.

One standout site, however, may be Legal OnRamp. Membership in Legal OnRamp is free to any in-house counsel. However, law firm attorneys can join only if invited by in-house counsel. Once in, basic networking is free, but members can pay for premium services such as a “private ramp” accessible only to members and the ability to automate legal processes. Those services range from \$30,000 to \$100,000 per year.

“Legal OnRamp seems to be the only one that’s viable at this point,” says Hawkins. “But it’s still a question mark. It’s not clear that the best lawyers are on that system. Will they have time to be adding content to the site, or will they be in the courtroom or doing deals?”

‘I’M IN. NOW WHAT?’

Many attorneys have had a two-step response to online social networking sites. First, they’ve decided they might as well load their profile because it’s free advertising. Then, when no fireworks have immediately illuminated the sky above them, they’ve wondered what all the fuss was about.

“I heard about LinkedIn and thought I’d give it a try because it can’t hurt,” says Michael D. Caccavo, a sole practitioner in Barre, Vt. “Then I thought, ‘I’m in. Now what do I do?’ ”

Caccavo has been a member of LinkedIn’s basic, no-cost service for more than a year. He’s joined a few groups (the estate-planning legal network, the New England legal network, the solo practitioners forum, solo marketing and Solosez friends), and he occasionally offers his expertise to LinkedIn’s “Answers” section, where members can pose questions and provide answers.

He hasn’t seen any tangible results, but he also isn’t disappointed. “I haven’t really advertised my LinkedIn presence too much, and I might have a better presence if I did,” Caccavo says. “But I’m not looking at it as a big marketing component. I’m experimenting a little to see where it goes.

“But so far, it has some value because I’m trying to develop more of a diverse set of connections, and it’s a diverse network. I also think, for professionals, it sets you apart as being more cutting-edge, particularly around this part of Vermont because a lot of people haven’t heard of it.”

Caccavo also joined Facebook in the summer after seeing extensive chatter on the ABA’s Solosez discussion group. “Facebook has been great for connecting with one of my kids who’s out in Oregon. I was able to see a picture of him fighting forest fires,” he says with a laugh. More seriously, he adds, “I don’t spend a lot of time on Facebook, and I don’t really know what I’m going to do with it.”

To get past that “now what?” feeling, lawyer-blogger Carolyn Elefant suggests starting small. “Pick one social network and focus on that instead of signing up for five or six and spreading yourself thin,” says the sole practitioner in Washington, D.C., and author of the e-book *Social Networking for Lawyers: What, Why & How*.

“Investigate a couple of sites and speak with colleagues to find which they’ve found to be the most useful,” Elefant says. “Join one and upload as much information as you can to make it a robust site. Then spend time looking around the site, doing searches, making contacts within the site and finding people who share similar interests. If you make a connection, the most useful thing to do is to take the conversation offline privately through phone or e-mail and get to know people on the sidelines.”

Before Thomas Rossmeissl joined Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman in Palo Alto, Calif., he was a trust attorney at a major West Coast bank. When the bank reorganized in January, Rossmeissl found himself out of a job.

“Because I had a fairly extensive network on LinkedIn that I could connect with immediately, I got another job fairly quickly,” he explains. “Whenever a change is made to the status of your profile, LinkedIn sends an e-mail to your network.”

That, Rossmeissl believes, is what made some legal recruiters get in touch. He was also able to send e-mails to all his connections on the network, which helped get the word out quickly that he was on a job hunt.

“Would I attribute getting my job so quickly directly to LinkedIn?” Rossmeissl asks. “Not 100 percent, but it helped to have that resource available.”

Griffin is still not sold. “Maybe it’s just an age thing, but I’d rely more on word of mouth because I think that while you open up more possibilities [with online networks], you also open up more dead ends,” he says. “It’s sort of like online dating. Do you want to go on more dates and have more dates fail, or do you want to narrow your search?”

Attorneys have benefited from information exchanges. “I’ve made a lot of connections with lawyers on Legal OnRamp who I probably never would have met any other way,” says David Cohen, director of legal affairs and risk management at the Major League Baseball Los Angeles Angels franchise in Anaheim, Calif. “I’ve also tapped into the expertise of others without generating a huge cost for my company.”

Specifically, when Cohen decided he wanted to test an alternative billing model to pay outside counsel handling general liability claims, he turned to Legal OnRamp. “I got into a discussion with a couple people, and they gave me tips for developing it and making sure it’s fair. Because of that, we’ve been able to develop a billing system with our [outside counsel] that works really well.”

STRENGTH FOR SOLOS

Many solos and small-firm attorneys say online networking has leveled the playing field between them and their big-firm counterparts.

Take Jonathan Davidoff, a former New York City solo who recently merged with two others to form Schwartz, Resnick & Davidoff in New York City. Davidoff is a member of both LinkedIn and Facebook. Though he praises LinkedIn for helping him reconnect with faces from his past, he’s getting more business because of Facebook’s instant-messaging feature, which isn’t available on LinkedIn. (IMs allow you to send a brief message that instantly appears on a friend’s computer screen and continue the discussion in real time.)

About 15 percent of Davidoff's business comes from referrals from Facebook friends because of its instant-messaging feature. "The personal interaction of an IM adds a lot more to the domain than LinkedIn," he says. "It's also free.

"This is basically how it goes: I get an IM from a friend that says, 'Hey Jonathan, how are you doing? I see you're living in New York City now. What kind of law are you practicing?' I tell him and later get another response: 'I have a friend who has this situation and doesn't want to spend a fortune on an attorney. Can you help?' All of a sudden, that's a \$20,000 client."

Though attorneys at large firms can also get those kinds of referrals, Davidoff says they're more valuable for solos and smaller firms. "The truth is that big law firms don't want their attorneys on Facebook because the business they'd get is minimal to none," he says. "Big firms don't want \$15,000 matters. They want \$150,000 matters. But for small firms, every client and every penny counts in today's economy."

Still, many attorneys get into online social networking with trepidation. Primary concerns include privacy, professionalism, increased spam and the time spent online.

Sometimes concerns about privacy and professionalism are related. "Your information is out there for the whole world to see, so you need to make sure you're not afraid for others to see it," says Sigman. "I'm very selective about what I put on these sites. I try to keep personal information out of my profiles, and that includes any photograph I'd consider unprofessional.

Stay away from pictures of you getting drunk at a bar."

That also means being judicious about publicizing personal beliefs that could make the wrong first impression. "Be cautious about the groups you join because that will show up on your profile," says Caccavo. "For that reason, I've stayed away from listing my political and religious preferences."

"The conclusion I've reached is that you shouldn't mix business with pleasure," says Melody Kramer, a sole practitioner in San Diego who belongs to several online social networks. Kramer is not only careful about her profiles, but also about comments her friends post on them. "Remember that anything that's accessible to the public, opposing counsel can access, too," she says.

Others, however, don't see a problem. "Some sites like Facebook and MySpace are less professional, but I don't really have concerns," says Elefant. "They're self-regulating. Lawyers putting pictures of themselves in a bikini online isn't very professional, but that's happened even without social networking sites. There are always opportunities for lawyers to make themselves look ridiculous, and it's not the tools but how you use them."

Some attorneys complain that online social networks can be time-suckers. You sign on, and the next time you look up, your morning's gone, and what do you have to show for it?

“You could spend days managing and upgrading these sites and responding to inquiries,” says Elefant. “Like everything else, you have to limit these activities to a certain time of day and a set number of hours so that you don’t get lost in them and get nothing done.”

Those aren’t just concerns for individual attorneys; they’re also potential headaches for large firms. “Law firms are concerned about online social networks as either a time-wasting vehicle or a way that information that the law firm would ordinarily hope to keep under wraps gets out into the world,” Howell says.

“I’ve heard stories about firms turning off Facebook access or having a policy against social networking, and I just laugh,” she says. “It’s the stupidest policy I could imagine if you want lawyers to develop as lawyers and as people who bring business into the firm. It’s like saying to generations past, ‘We’re not going to let you call your friends on the phone, go golfing with them or have cocktails after work.’”

“Social networking has supplemented those kinds of real-world networks and made them something that’s persistent and always on. A cultural shift is under way, and law firms are behind the curve,” Howell adds. “Law firms are going to have to accept the fact that the distinction between personal and professional is blurred, and they’re going to have to accommodate that in a way that makes sense. The smart law firms will find a way to embrace this.”

Smart individual attorneys will, too, says Davidoff. “This isn’t just a temporary wave,” he says. “It’s a wave of today and tomorrow. It’s just like the telephone. There will be variations and improvements, but the telephone is here to stay, and so are these networking domains. These sites have the potential to be great.”

Gary Griffin

EXPERTISE Griffin specializes in civil litigation, particularly constitutional questions and challenges to Illinois law on behalf of the state attorney general’s office. A longtime litigator, Griffin would rather be in court than fielding discovery.

INTERESTS Griffin is a golf nut who’s traveled to Alabama, California, Florida and South Carolina just to tee off. He’s also a basketball fan, a lifelong supporter of the Chicago White Sox, a movie buff and a fan of redheaded women. You may have heard of his famous sister, “D-List” comic Kathy Griffin.

Scott Sigman

EXPERTISE Sigman spent six years with the Philadelphia district attorney's office before entering private practice. Today, criminal law is his expertise, especially drug-related cases. He uses that expertise to practice criminal defense and civil litigation.

INTERESTS Sigman loves politics, the law and networking. One day, he'd like to run for district attorney of Philadelphia. Sigman also loves traveling but says he doesn't do it enough. His next trip will either be to London or to Italy for the sixth time. He enjoys walking his dog, Rocky, an 11-year-old basset hound that he rescued.

Suzanne Hawkins

EXPERTISE Hawkins is a senior legal industry expert with expertise in legal technology and knowledge management, inside-outside counsel relationships, and process improvement.

INTERESTS Travel, languages and fashion design are Hawkins' interests. She and her family traveled to the island of Ischia, Italy, in summer 2008. Her next trip will likely be to Greece in 2009. Hawkins lived in Germany for three years and considers herself a global citizen with a strong interest in cultures and languages. She used to design historical costumes and is still interested in fabrics and designs.

G.M. Filisko is a lawyer and freelance journalist in Chicago.

Sidebar

Insights on Sites

A number of social networking sites hope they have lawyer appeal, including:

[CasemakerX](#)—A free social networking and research tool that allows law students to search primary federal and state law.

[Facebook](#)—The Hot Spot, it claims 90 million users. Though it began as a personal social network, its business application has grown.

[LawLink](#)—A no-cost lawyer-to-lawyer network with about 4,000 members, including the Santa Clara County (Calif.) Bar Association.

[Legal OnRamp](#)—an invitation-only site for some; in-house counsel can join without restriction, but law firm attorneys must be invited. The site stresses collaboration by sharing opinions, research, work product and other information. For such premium services as a “private ramp”

accessible only to certain people and the ability to automate legal processes, members pay from \$30,000-\$100,000 per year.

[LinkedIn](#)—Boasted 25 million members as of July and claims 1 million new members join every month. For upgraded services, such as the ability to contact other members through the site, fees begin at \$19.95 per month.

[Martindale-Hubbell Connected](#)—To launch in early 2009. Members will be able to determine whether the lawyers they're researching are connected through their personal LinkedIn relationships. Membership will be free for attorneys who advertise in Martindale-Hubbell.

[Merrill Lextranet 5.6](#)—Merrill adds social networking. Membership is free to corporations using its case management programs. (Info only—must buy software and services to access)

[MySpace](#)—The Granddaddy, with more than 100 million members. Though some professionals use MySpace for business connections, many consider it youth-dominated and more of a personal site.