

Business Development with Online Social Networking

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Larry Bodine

Many firms would like to turn back the clock and do business as they did in the old, pre-Internet days. Few of us like change, but a huge business development conversation has moved online and lawyers must adapt to it. The motivator couldn't be better: there are lot of clients, new files and increased revenue to be found online.

Consider this:

- **Nearly half -- 48% -- of Americans age 12 and older have an online profile on at least one social network**, according to a new national survey from Arbitron and Edison Research. See <http://alturl.com/a52t>
- **This is about double the level from two years ago** (24 percent in 2008), according to the survey titled, "The Infinite Dial 2010: Digital Platforms and the Future of Radio." **"Social networking has become a part of mainstream media behavior,"** Tom Webster, VP of strategy and marketing at Edison Research.
- **It's not just the kids who have personal profile pages.** Almost two-thirds of those in the 25 to 34 age group -- 65% -- and half of those 35 to 44 -- 51% -- also now have personal profile pages. "The use of social networking sites has expanded beyond younger consumers, with **substantial numbers of Americans over the age of 35 now using social media,**" said Bill Rose, SVP of marketing at Arbitron.

Online networking is no substitute for "IRL" ("in real life") business development. I still believe that face-to-face business development is the best approach to grow a clientele. However, *one-on-one networking has its limits*, because you can only meet so many people in person at one time. By using online social techniques, a lawyer's ability to develop new relationships and market themselves increases exponentially, in light of how many prospective and existing clients are active on the Internet.

Online social networks allow lawyers to:

- Create an online presence.
- Make it easy for clients and potential clients to contact you.
- Showcase your knowledge and get out your marketing message

Why Bother with Online Business Development?

- 1.3 million lawyers have LinkedIn profiles
- Facebook has 400 million users
- Facebook gets 37.4 TRILLION page views in a year
- Twitter transmits 50 million tweets *per day*
- 247 Billion e-mails are sent per day
- There are 234 million Websites

See <http://alturl.com/78yf> for more details

- Meet potential clients and generate leads.
- Stay in touch with current and past clients.
- Create a path to meeting in person

Why bother with online networking?

For starters, the world has changed. Baby Boomers are now outnumbered! We (I'm a Boomer) account for only 23% of the population. Meanwhile, the largest generation in the world today is known variously as the Net Generation, Millennials or Gen X. Born after 1977, they are now the biggest generation with 27% of the population.

Members of the new generation are "digital natives," meaning that grew up with the Internet, cell phones, texting and online networking. They didn't have to learn it; it was all around them. These people are now halfway to becoming partners in law firms. Among clients, they will soon be making buying decisions regarding law firms. It makes sense for lawyers who want their business to speak their language in online forums where they congregate.

Overwhelming choices

At first, the number of choices seems overwhelming. There's Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, MySpace, Naymz, Spoke, Plaxo, Martindale Connected, Legal OnRamp, listservs and JD Supra – just to name a few. The good news is that lawyers can ignore most of them, concentrate on a single online network, and turn their efforts into new clients, new files and new billable work. Another big plus is that all the online networks are free.

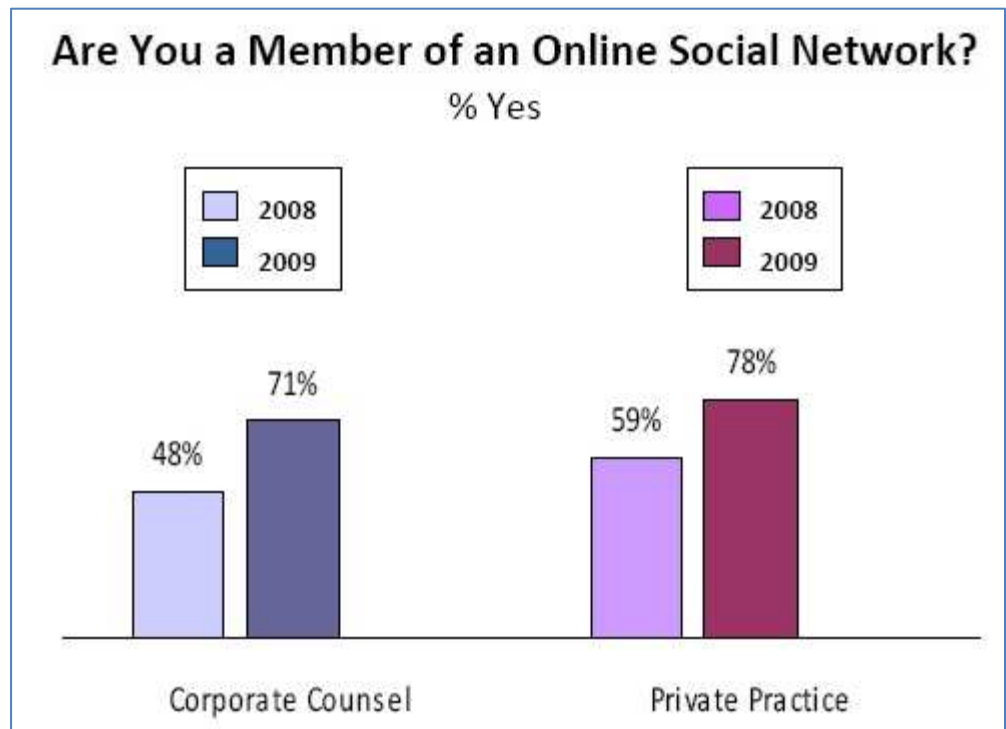
In the legal profession -- 78% of lawyers have joined an online social network -- and here's the good part -- so have 71% of in-house counsel, according to a 2008 Leader Networks study. See the chart or visit

<http://alturl.com/qwxg>

So where do I start?

Begin by eliminating the time-wasters like

MySpace, which has been losing users since



the *New York Times* reported that 90,000 registered sex offenders had MySpace profiles. As for Naymz, Spoke and Plaxo – none of them get enough traffic to be worth your time.

Facebook is the 800-pound gorilla with 500 million users.

I estimate there are 2,000 law firms with firm pages on Facebook, and most the firms are solos or very small. Because of the casual and personal nature of Facebook, I don't consider it a good place to conduct business development for lawyers.

For law firms, Facebook is useful for *staying in touch with people you used to know* – and for recruiting. For example Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, a New York law firm, created a Facebook page at <http://bit.ly/pWw3c> because the site is useful to reach people in their 20s and 30s.

Caveats for lawyers posting messages or comments using online social networking:

- Stick with facts, current events, trends, news.
- Don't offer legal advice online – you'll create unwanted clients.
- Don't take a position on a court opinion – it may conflict with colleague writing a brief
- Don't discuss client confidential material.
- Don't call people names or defame them.

Smart law firms have an online social networking policy, and you can find one for free at <http://alturl.com/ohah> (it's the first form on the page).

Caveat: If you have a personal Facebook account, don't put anything online that you don't want clients to see. Also be aware that anyone can write anything on your wall, or post a picture on their own account showing you in an embarrassing way. Be sure to use the privacy settings (which 80% of Facebook members fail to do) to assure that your managing partner or a client doesn't see that photo of you and your fraternity brothers sprawled out on the lawn.

Twitter is a "miniblogging" or messaging service that gives you 140 characters to send a "tweet." Twitter is a supplemental marketing tool that you can use to:

- Tweet news releases, articles of interest to clients, new laws and regulations, your speaking engagements. However, you only have enough characters to set forth the title and a link to where the source material is.
- Use as a news monitor by following important clients that are tweeting, follow top legal and industry authorities, and monitor what's being said about your firm. To do this, you'll have to download helper software like Tweetdeck or Hootsuite. Limit the number of people you follow or else it will be like drinking from a fire hose.
- Develop a collection of followers to your tweets, with the hope that they re-tweet your messages.

After searching for a year, I did find a real lawyer who landed real clients using Twitter. Robert C. White, age 55 (not a member of the Net generation) is a shareholder at Gunster, Yoakley, in Florida (not a net aficionado tweeting from a laptop in a Starbucks). His firm has 140 attorneys in Florida and markets itself as the *oldest* commercial law firm in Palm Beach County (not as a cutting-edge high-tech law firm). Under the name @SoFlaTechLawyer, Mr. White tweeted a

message about issues affecting the cell phone industry, and two cell phone companies called him up and now are his clients. So Twitter works in generating business, especially if you practice in a niche (like Mr. White, who is a technology lawyer).

But there are weaknesses in Twitter as a new-business tool. Consider that:

- Only 6 percent of lawyers participate in microblogging (Twitter, etc.), according to a new survey by Leader Networks. See bit.ly/1LTWn
- Only 4 percent of in-house lawyers participate in Twitter according to the same survey.
- 60% of Twitter users drop out after one month, according to Nielsen Wire.
- 10% of Twitter users account for over 90% of tweets, according to Harvard Business School.
- The average Twitter user tweets once and never again, according to Harvard Business School.
- 55% of people who signed up for an account never posted a tweet, according to HubSpot's State of the Twittersphere.

Sure you can meet people on Twitter by using the "@" reply feature or the direct message feature. That's the start of the relationship, which then can be pursued via Twitter, email, telephone or in person. But remember – there are almost no potential clients on Twitter for lawyers.

LinkedIn: the place to devote your efforts

LinkedIn.com has become the definitive directory of professionals of all sorts – lawyers, accountants, engineers and business executives. LinkedIn has:

- More than 65 million members in over 150 countries around the world.
- Members who represent 200+ industries.
- Executives from all Fortune 500 companies are LinkedIn members.
- A new member joins LinkedIn approximately every second, and about half of its members are outside the U.S.

LinkedIn is for *meeting new people – and making new business connections.*

Having a complete profile with a color photo is the starting point. Thereafter you must *use* LinkedIn to generate new business:

1. Invite clients, potential clients and referral sources to connect with you. **Whenever you speak to a client, referral source, prospect or news person, get their email address and invite them to connect to you.** In line with this approach, accept the invitations of people you want to know for new-business purposes.
2. **Seek recommendations.** When your client is delighted with the outcome of a case or completion of a deal, at that moment, email them a “request for recommendation” and

ask them to say something positive about you. This is a testimonial, which is very powerful marketing.

3. **Join a Group.** This is where the action happens on LinkedIn. You can find a group for your practice area, an association you belong to, or an industry where you would like more clients.
4. **Start a Discussion.** Every group has online discussions, giving you a chance to demonstrate your expertise. Pick a hot topic of the day and ask for opinions. By starting a discussion you are positioning yourself as a leader.
5. **Make a Comment.** LinkedIn will email you a current list of discussions underway. This is your chance to chime in on an offer a comment. Bear in mind the caveats identified in the sidebar.
6. **Join local business and industry groups.** They may have regular in-person meetings, but the members stay in touch on LinkedIn between meetings. Send questions to local members, extend connections locally via introductions and keep an eye for local live activities to participate in.

Feel free to connect with me at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/larrybodine>

Other sites worth visiting include:

- **Legal OnRamp**, at www.legalonramp.com, the online network for 6,000 in-house counsel plus 5,000 lawyers in private practice. The site is designed for in-house lawyers (potential clients!) who can ask questions, search lawyer profiles and share best practices. This is a very active site with lots of discussions. Some corporations even use it to issue RFP's – requests for proposals. FMC Technologies did so last year, seeking tech-savvy law firms to handle their litigation. 50 firms applied and 8 firms were selected – ranging in size from 8-lawyer firms to 750-lawyer firms. A lawyer in private practice can request an invitation to join, and you'll be asked to contribute content and bring along a few clients as members, which is a fair trade. See <http://bit.ly/eOAWu> for details.
- **JD Supra**, at www.JDSupra.com, where lawyers can market the old fashioned way: with their written work. JDSupra knows that before clients think to hire a lawyer, they try to read up on the law by themselves first. Visitors can search the site for free, research their issue and then find the lawyer with the best documents. JDSupra is a huge online repository of court filings, decisions, forms, articles, alerts and law firm newsletters. The site allows a lawyer to upload a document (for free) which is then linked to the lawyer's bio. In recent months JD Supra has also become a place to distribute and syndicate your written materials. The site has become a distribution service, and uploaded documents are re-broadcast to 12 LinkedIn groups, 23 Facebook legal pages, 31 RSS legal feeds, and 33 Twitter accounts. (Note: I myself have uploaded more than 100 articles on business development for lawyers this year.)

In Summary

I highly recommend that lawyers:

- Create a LinkedIn Profile *today*
 - *Connect with people you meet*
 - *Join a group*
 - *Join a discussion*
 - *Ask a question*
- Join LegalOnRamp.com and upload articles & FAQs
- Upload a document to JDSupra.com
- Give Martindale Connected a try.

And in all new-business ventures, I wish you happy hunting!

For more on this topic, call:

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