

Back to the Future



When I became one of the first sales directors at a law firm a little more than 10 years ago, my vision for law firm sales was complex and dynamic, like a [Marcel Duchamp](#) painting. I thought we would more or less transplant the best processes, technologies and metrics from the accounting and consulting worlds into this new environment.

After 10 years of first-hand experience, a lot of reading, a lot of stubbed toes, and the benefit of research from [Hellerman Baretz](#), [BTI Consulting](#) and other law-firm thinkers, my current vision of law firm sales is more like a [Mark Rothko](#).



I believe, and it is confirmed nearly every day that I interact with inside counsel and other buyers of legal services, that buyers – nearly 70% of the time – find and engage lawyers based on relationships with peers, lawyers at existing law firms, and trusted advisers from banks, accounting firms, consulting firms and the like. When buyers' relationship networks fail to identify an appropriate outside lawyer, they then most often turn to search engines. So I spend my time these days thinking less about complex processes than about how lawyers can a) initiate, build and monetize relationships, and b) enhance their findability on search engines.

Turns out that a phenomenon of the 21st century addresses both of these channels (relationships and search engines): social media and related digital properties such as blogs..

Over the last five years, social media has evolved from a toy to a professional tool. It is proving an effective way to initiate and build relationships that over time could become business engagements. Some lawyers that I know have advanced connections on LinkedIn and Twitter all the way to new business. One member of my team communicates exclusively with an important client via FaceBook. Social media is a way to deliver business content. In fact, at the recent [Marketing Partner Forum 2012](#), General Electric Associate General Counsel [Janine Dascenzo](#) commented that Twitter is the best way of providing information to her and other inside counsel, and that law firms need

immediately to become facile at its usage. And, activity in the digital space including social media is a way to enhance search engine ratings. In short, for busy lawyers, social media creates superb leverage and time management.

Despite all of this, adoption of social media by lawyers lags. One study indicated that of 20 or so professions studied, only farmers used social media less than lawyers. I suppose that this is understandable in the risk- and change-averse world of law. And yet, there are reasons to believe this we will not stay put. In preparing for the May 11-12 [American Lawyer Law Firm Marketing and Business Development Leadership Forum](#) in New York, I have been reflecting on my early years in the work force where, as a reporter for a small Indiana newspaper in the late 1970s, I interviewed the local postmaster who was retiring after 30 years of service. I asked him to project the future of his profession. “Electronic mail will change the way we communicate,” he said. As I went back to my office to compose the story on an IBM Selectric typewriter, I was floored. I didn’t have a clue what e-mail was.

Fast forward a few years to the beginnings of my professional services career at Price Waterhouse, which, at the time, was revolutionizing the accounting world by putting personal computers on the desktops of each employee and deploying [Lotus Notes](#) for electronic communications. I distinctly remember CPAs voicing a litany of qualms revolving around information security, lack of the personal touch, time demands of learning a new technology, etc. etc. A decade or more later, when I first arrived in the law firm world, many lawyers in many firms had not yet made the transition fully. They coped with e-mail by having secretaries print out e-mails, by dictating responses, and by having secretaries hit the “send” button on e-mail responses. We’ve come a long way since then; today, e-mail is the universal channel of choice, creating, among other things, the cottage industry of e-discovery. But we’re not stopping here. Early adopters at law firms are increasingly utilizing social media as an important communications channel. It’s a bit of a dilemma, because this approach requires going back and forth between two worlds – e-mail and social media, which is not unlike the transition in law firms 20 years ago as we moved uneasily between faxes and US Postal Service mail on the one hand, and e-mail on the other.

It is possible that in the years ahead, e-mail may go the way of US Postal Service mail. It seems possible that it still will exist as an important communications channel, but it may be transcended by

social media as an even more important channel. Today's young people (i.e. tomorrow's buyers of legal services) have bypassed even e-mail, preferring texting and social media as primary communications channels, and rarely utilizing e-mail. And today's social media will continue to evolve, with new platforms supplanting today's well-entrenched FaceBook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

As that wise Indiana postmaster sagely predicted more than 30 years ago, technological change is inevitable in the realm of communications. People invariably gravitate toward new communication outlets that can distribute information faster and to a desired audience. Our corporate clients already are aggressively and creatively engaging customers through social media. Just as we did in moving from US Postal Service mail to e-mail, we eventually will cross that bridge as well.

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