

LinkedIn: Lawyers and law firms Can use social networks to develop new business

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LinkedIn is a professional online social networking site with more than 48 million members in 200 countries around the world. As of today, nearly one million of these members are lawyers. The rest are your clients and potential clients, referral sources and influencers.

Social networks like LinkedIn are the Internet extension of the traditional networking events where lawyers circulated and introduced themselves to generate new business.

Participation in traditional networking events was limited by physical reality. A lawyer could only interact with a limited number of people at one place at one time. It took many years of networking outside the office to make a strong impression.

By comparison, participation in online social networks is unlimited by physical constraints. A lawyer can network with countless people, around the world, 24/7 – without ever leaving his or her office.

“Although the number of lawyers on LinkedIn is steadily increasing,” said John Reed, “very few of them are taking full advantage of LinkedIn’s potential as an inexpensive thought-leadership and business development tool. Executives from all Fortune 500 companies are members of LinkedIn. Shouldn’t you be where your clients are?”

Together with Laura Hazen, Reed discussed the business development uses of LinkedIn at the monthly educational program of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association (www.legalmarketing.org/rockymountain), which took place Oct. 13 at Maggiano’s Little Italy in Denver.

Reed is a senior vice president with public relations firm Jaffe Associates (www.jaffeassociates.com). Hazen is a director with the law firm Ireland Stapleton Pryor & Pasco (www.irelandstapleton.com). She is a practicing lawyer who has received work as a result of her LinkedIn profile and network.

Profiles and networks

LinkedIn is a social medium, which means that it hosts the online platform but users provide all of the content and connections. To begin, each member opens a free account, posts a profile, builds a network and uses that network to interact with other members.

“When creating your profile, you can use your Web site bio as a start -- but consider enhancing it for social networking purposes,” said Reed.

“Your profile should accurately and specifically describe who you are and what you do,” said Reed. “It should include lots of details – like your schools, employers and niche practice areas. Think of the keywords a potential client might be using to search for a lawyer, and make sure these appear in your profile.

“Upload a photo to your profile – perhaps one that is less formal than the one on your Web site,” said Reed. “Also, LinkedIn will assign your profile page a URL that is quite generic. Follow the directions that show you how to change that generic URL into a ‘vanity’ URL that includes your name and looks better in print and electronic communications. Include this link in your vCard, email signature and elsewhere.”

Once you have created your profile, you can create your network by connecting with others. LinkedIn builds networks by connecting individuals within “three degrees of separation.” In other words, when you connect with someone, you gain access to all of their public connections – and vice versa.

LinkedIn will sift through your Outlook contacts to let you know which of your current contacts are already in the LinkedIn database – and let you send them an invitation. This is an easy way to get started. You can also search the network to find potential connections and send them an invitation, which they can accept or decline. Once you have posted a profile, others can find you and invite you to join their networks.

Networks are searchable by personal names, company names and other keywords. If you need an introduction to someone at XYZ Corp, or information about XYZ Corp prior to a meeting, you can search your network for someone with a helpful connection there.

LinkedIn search is also a valuable networking resource when you are traveling. If you are going to be in Chicago, for example, you can search your network for Chicago-based members and make plans to meet them in person while you are in town.

Power tools

Once you have a profile and a network, you are ready to move on to more proactive use of LinkedIn. You can make and ask for recommendations. “These recommendations, however, must meet the ethics requirements of your state bar,” said Hazen. “They cannot

misrepresent or create expectations. There can be no *quid pro quo*. In employment matters, recommendations are discoverable and can come back to bite you.”

LinkedIn can be used to join groups that have been organized around a common interest – including professional, industry and trade groups; alumni groups; issue groups; practice groups and others. Most members start by searching the Groups Directory by keyword.

You can also proactively create and manage a group around a particular project or an idea – like IP law in China or family law in Colorado. “The simple act of creating a group positions you as a thought leader in a niche area,” said Hazen. “Groups can be public or private. You can invite clients, potential clients, referral sources, reporters, trade groups and conference planners to join your group.”

You can also use LinkedIn to ask questions of those in your network – and provide answers. “Starting discussions and offering comments is a great way to position yourself as an expert,” said Reed. “Of course, you must be careful to stay within the realm of general information and not give specific legal advice.”

LinkedIn offers a number of free add-on applications that add richness to your profile and networking efforts. You can use these “apps” to poll your network or group; to pull posts from your blog to your profile; to post documents, presentations, photos, videos and PowerPoint presentations; to create workspaces so network members can collaborate on projects; to add a Twitter feed; to share your travel plans with those in your network; and even to write book reviews using information from Amazon.

“If you are going to write and post a book review, it should probably be on a subject of interest to your target network – like a new book on a legal subject,” said Reed. “Book reviews are as searchable by keyword as anything else on your LinkedIn profile.”

To help you monitor your network, LinkedIn offers a daily update that lets you know about any new activities in the lives of your connections. (It also lets others know about activities taking place on your profile.) These include new connections, status, groups, photos, questions and answers, recommendations, events and application activity. You can also choose to have updates sent to you via email.

“This is data mining at its purest,” said Reed. “Each of these changes is an opportunity for you to contact the connection and strengthen your relationship.”

Finally, member profiles on LinkedIn (and other social networks) are well-optimized for the search engines. “If someone searches for you by name, chances are excellent that your well-crafted LinkedIn profile will show up near the top,” said Hazen. “A searcher who is also on LinkedIn can go right to your profile to invite you to connect.”

Ethical concerns

Even though social networks are ‘personal’ sites, lawyers and law firms should use them with the same professional and ethical constraints they would use with any other tool – be it print, email, telephone or personal contact. The same rules apply.

“Smart firms and smart businesses will adopt a social media policy that is neither too restrictive (so as to discourage business development) nor too lenient (so as to raise ethics concerns or create HR issues),” said Hazen. Jaffe Associates offers a sample Social Media and Social Networking Policies and Procedures at no charge at www.jaffeassociates.com.

“Online, lawyers should never give legal advice, discuss client matters, sell their services, post anything that would embarrass them in front of clients or employers, or make job recommendations for associates or staff,” said Hazen. “In other words, do not post anything you wouldn’t put on your firm’s Web site or want to see on the front page of the newspaper.”

Many of the concepts included in this discussion of LinkedIn also apply to other social networks. By posting your profile on multiple social networks, you improve your position among search engine results and more actively manage your online public reputation.

“Consider where you want to be and how you want to be perceived,” said Hazen. “Do not spread yourselves too thin. Busy attorneys need to have manageable expectations and create a plan for where they want to be online. Should the people who are your ‘connections’ on LinkedIn also be your ‘friends’ on Facebook? Are you sharing information in one forum that is inappropriate for another?”

Martindale Hubbell Connected, Legal OnRamp and JDSupra are social networks designed specifically for lawyer-to-lawyer networking. More general social networks like Facebook and MySpace have millions of members, which may or may not be consistent with your online marketing plan.

Twitter is a microblog platform that allows users to send out 140-character posts that lawyers can use to position themselves as experts in a particular area of the law. Twitter also allows you to search the “Twitterverse” for any comments pertaining to you, your firm, your practice area, your clients and your competitors.

Because of its business focus and broad base of business users, LinkedIn should be a part of any marketing strategy – especially for lawyers. By helping you grow your network and your online footprint, LinkedIn helps you establish thought-leadership, build your business, get advice and information, and advance your career.