

Inside the Mind of In-house Counsel

What is the thought process the General Counsel goes through when they need to find outside counsel? I interviewed over a dozen GC's and in-house counsel this past week at the Inside Counsel Superconference in Chicago to find the answer. (Search for #ICSC10 at <http://search.twitter.com> to see the tweets from the conference). Not surprisingly, the #1 source for outside counsel when looking for outside support was referrals. "If we don't already know someone who can help us, we ask for a referral from someone we trust in a related field or geography," explained Michael Gruskin, Legal Global Process Leader of Litigation for General Motors. If that doesn't work, I asked him what the next step would be- of course at that point he conceded that he could do a Google search. The online search was a last resort though, not a first step. So where does this take us?

Relationships are more important than ever. Do you have a specialty niche in the law? Do your peers know that? Do other lawyers respect you for your ability in that area? There has been a lot of criticism over the years about the futility of networking at local bar events or more recently on lawyer sites like [Legal On-ramp](#) and [Martindale-Hubbel Connected](#). Although some are in-house counsel on these sites, most of them people aren't potential clients, are they? But all of them are potential referral sources, and if you are referred by a trusted source- you move to the front of the line in the RFP process or avoid the RFP process altogether.

So where does social media fit in? Is it really worth the sacrifice in terms of time and energy? Social media all is about relationships, not about closing new business. The quality of your relationships and the interactions you have with influential referrals sources is more important now than ever. In-house counsel have no other choice than rely on referrals, they are far too busy for the most part to surf LinkedIn and Twitter when looking for outside counsel.

"I use LinkedIn only because I was invited," explained another GC. "I receive so many emails each day, the last thing I want to do is spend time on LinkedIn or Facebook reading more messages." This response was pretty typical of the older in-house counsel I spoke with. 71% of those I interviewed used Facebook while a surprisingly small 50% used LinkedIn, and only a few were active users. For those counsel under the age of 40, 100% had Twitter accounts, for those over 40 years old there wasn't a single Twitter user. While my sample size was only 14, it was interesting to see it fall into the expected stereotypes.

"I like to use listserve of corporate counsel," explained Michael Gruskin from GM. "I can ask the list for referrals, with a higher level of confidence because they are all in-house." See, it isn't that in-house counsel doesn't want to use technology to find lawyers- they just want to use the right technology to get help in the most efficient way possible. This new technology brings us back to the old saying, it isn't what you know, its who you know.

So how do you know which relationships are the most valuable? It's tough, you know who you touch- but it is almost impossible to tell who THEY touch. One things for sure, more strong relationships are better. Two weeks ago a partner from Sullivan and Cromwell was asked in a lunch session, "how does your firm keep on top year-in and year-out?" The answer wasn't too surprising, "every few years we lose some great attorneys to retirement and people within the firm predict a decline, but younger attorneys take their place and the firm continues on just as strong as before." So what is the constant? You had to read between the lines in listening to him speak, but the constant that spans their history is the relationships. The relationships of the white shoe firms are far more valuable than the ivy-league degrees and legal analysis of their attorneys.

In-house counsel will continue to hire people they know and they trust. So either you can earn their trust, or gain the confidence of the referrals sources that will help you get a foot in the door. It has taken Sullivan & Cromwell over 130 years to build those kinds of powerful relationships, so you better get started.