

Social media? Nothing to be afraid of

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In the Middle Ages a certain class of people was more mistrusted than any other: millers.

You see, few people owned their own mill, and so they needed to take their grain to the miller to be ground into flour. The problem was that, when the grain was handed over, there was no way of knowing if the miller was being honest — he could have been keeping some for himself. The common farmer had no way of knowing whether he was being cheated. This same mistrust happens today with car mechanics, doctors and probably even some types of lawyers. Sadly, some people feel the same way about social media.

Many lawyers claim to be technologically too far behind to ever use such advanced technologies as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. They mistrust it, just like farmers mistrusted the millers, because they don't understand the technology.

I have a simple message for those in fear of this new technology: As technology advances, an interesting phenomenon occurs. It becomes ever simpler to use.

Think about how the iPad changes the movie-watching experience. You used to need to know how to operate three remote controls (TV, sound system and DVD player) to watch a movie. Now my 3-year-old can touch a couple of buttons and watch the cartoon of his choice on my iPad. Or look at the Wii video game system. My father-in-law, who is decidedly anti-video games, can play Wii tennis with his grandkids because it is so similar to playing actual tennis (without any of the running around and chasing balls). He didn't catch up with technology; technology caught up with him. Social media is undergoing a similar dynamic. Anybody can use it, but they need to give it a chance.

I remember the first time I showed my father how to do a simple Google search. He tried a couple of search terms, and he was hooked. It wasn't difficult after all — it only required filling in a single clearly marked box and pressing "search." Google search doesn't need a customer service line, because the technology itself is so absurdly simple. Social media, similarly, are very easy to use, but you do need to make a commitment to give them a try. I've helped hundreds of lawyers start to use social media. Not all of them have made it a habit, but I have yet to hear someone complain that it is technologically too challenging for them.

Take Twitter, one of the most basic of sites. You follow people and things that interest you, and you share or "tweet" about people or things that you find of value. Where do you enter these messages? In a clearly marked box, where you are limited to 140 characters. How do you get

started? Go to Twitter.com, click on "sign up" and then follow the step-by-step instructions. The more Twitter advances, the easier it gets to use. It shows you whom to follow, helps you find topics of interest and walks you through the entire process.

LinkedIn is similarly foolproof: Sign up at LinkedIn.com, follow the prompts and start connecting. They even have a tool that will import all your existing contacts directly from Outlook so that you can see which of your friends are already using LinkedIn. Once you have joined, the site will suggest people for you to connect with based on the school you attended or groups you are a member of. LinkedIn does most of the work for you. This is not something to be afraid of.

Blogging is the easiest tool of all. You can start a blog in five minutes: Simply go to Wordpress.com, Blogspot.com or some other blogging service, click on "start a new blog" and follow the prompts. Once you've created your blog, writing a new post is as easy as writing a document using Microsoft Word. Actually, it is easier — as easy as filling in a search term on Google and pressing "search" (except this time you are going to hit "publish").

Aren't there strategies and tactics and etiquette to learn? Sure, but mostly these come down to common sense. The most important part is signing up and starting to explore.

There are things to be afraid of in this world — things you may never understand, like how to fix a carburetor, deliver a baby or mill wheat — but social media aren't among them. Grandparents outnumber high school students on Facebook, according to <http://readwriteweb.com>. This is because Facebook is easy and accessible. You may not enjoy social media, but don't avoid them out of fear — the Dark Ages have long since ended.

Adrian Dayton is a lawyer, author and speaker about business development for law firms. He helps groups of lawyers within firms overcome their fears of social media and begin to build their brand online. Learn more at <http://adriandayton.com>.