

Social Media Is Not Snake Oil

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In 1996, Clifford Stoll wrote a popular book entitled "Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway." It was well received because it was contrarian, made us second-guess our assumptions about computers, and contained a warning for those looking to benefit from this new thing called the internet. In retrospect, Stoll was dead wrong. He suggested the internet would never be good for commerce; that people would always prefer playing card games face to face; and that the acoustics of a working typewriter were in many ways superior to a keyboard and word processing program.

A similar argument is raging in the blogosphere, and has been for some time. The latest installment is from the *ABA Journal*: "[Social Media or Snake Oil: Does Social Media Measure Up to the Hype?](#)" My friends at Great Jakes Marketing Co. noticed a similar trend in their article, "[Brace yourself for the backlash against social media marketing.](#)" Why does it seem this topic keeps resurfacing? Contrarian views are always popular because they make the Luddites feel safe. But the people making decisions at your firm need to take care not to dismiss social media based on a reliance on the old ways, or they may be setting themselves up for failure. It was this kind of thinking that almost put the Eastman Kodak Co. out of business when digital cameras came out. This same backwards thinking has led to the failure of countless businesses, as documented in Clayton Christensen's book, "[The Innovator's Dilemma.](#)" Time and again, businesses fail when they refuse to recognize the importance of disruptive innovation. Clifford Stoll made that mistake in his book, and now many law firms are falling into the same trap over social media.

Some of the common excuses I hear are: "We don't have a social media policy yet." "We are waiting for the ABA to come out with guidelines." "Our lawyers prefer to network face to face." Whatever your excuses, keep in mind that while you wait, the world is changing all around you. There are now more grandparents than high school students using Facebook, according to this article on [ReadWriteWeb](#).

The time is long past for asking, "Should we use social media?" The question today needs to be, "How can we use social media effectively?"

So how can your firm use social media? Think small. Very small. Start thinking about how your attorneys can better leverage social media as individuals. The average Facebook user has 130 friends. Multiply this by 100 lawyers and you can reach 13,000 people. For law firms to use social media effectively, they need to allow their attorneys to *be* social online.

This number 130 is interesting because it is so close to the number 150, which anthropologists refer to as [Dunbar's number](#). Robin Dunbar is an anthropologist who posited that 150 is the theoretical limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships. Once you get

above that, tribes or organizations are much more challenging to manage. So, the goal with social media is not to expand your network to 1,500 or even 15,000 friends, but instead to be more connected to your friends and add people to your tribe of 150 in a targeted way.

GIVE FIRE TO THE NATIVES

Let your attorneys participate in Web 2.0. There are two primary behaviors they can begin with online. First, they can listen to what the biggest concerns of their contacts and clients are. Second, they can engage in conversations with these people by commenting on their blogs, responding to articles they post and forwarding the good content they see to others. One of my clients has a daily habit of reading all the best intellectual property news of the day. He prints out the most important articles and adds them to a paper file. For him, it has been very easy to add one step and share those important articles via LinkedIn and Twitter. The most successful users of social media find a way to fit these new tools into their existing routine.

What kind of results can lawyers expect? Part of the failure of social media discussion is in the unrealistic expectations we place on these tools. Social media aren't going to sell your services for you; they aren't going to set up sales calls; and they certainly aren't going to provide the all important follow-up needed to close business. Those behaviors and habits need to be in place well before you start engaging contacts and prospects online.

The other buzzword of the day is ROI -- return on investment. Is there a measurable return on investment for social media? This isn't really a fair question -- not because you shouldn't be looking for a return, but because the return won't be the same for everyone. I've seen many attorneys create LinkedIn or Twitter accounts, never update them and never see a single penny of business as a result. Similarly, I talk to attorneys who attend state bar networking functions without ever seeming to bring home a single solid lead on new business. Is the problem with the networking function, or with the attorney? It is likely a combination of the two.

Results will vary, but the social media practices that don't work are coming into focus. Here are just a few to avoid:

1. **Broadcasting.** Try not to overload Twitter or LinkedIn with frequent messages without also responding to others, commenting or participating in conversations.
2. **Self-promoting.** Don't broadcast awards you won, deals you finished or how good you are at lawyering. This not only turns people off, it adds to the noise online.
3. **Spamming.** Never send newsletters, white papers, and other materials to people who haven't requested them. Those found guilty of spamming in the social media will lose credibility very quickly. So what does work in the social media world? Adding value. Create content that helps and informs your contact and clients. Be generous with your knowledge. Help those in your sphere of influence and your reputation will grow in the online world.

I don't expect the debate over social media to subside anytime soon, and there will always be laggards -- just as each office still has a senior partner who refuses to use e-mail. One thing is becoming clear though: Social media aren't going away. They are changing the way people communicate and share information in a fundamental way, so law firms that don't want to be left behind need to figure out how they can participate in this new world.

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