

Social Media Mania



BY HEATHER SUTTIE

Even though social media is the latest shiny new thing, the adoption of tweeting, blogging, poking, friending and connecting is best taken slowly and after careful thought

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Have you heard of Twitter? Do you wish you hadn't? Well, you're hardly alone. Social media has been upon us for a while and it's here to stay. But even though social media is being heralded as the "newest shiny thing," that doesn't necessarily mean it's the newest shiny thing for you, or that you have to scramble to get to it right this very minute.

In their 2009 report *What's Hot and What's Not in the Legal Profession*, US-based Robert Denney Associates put online social networking at the top of the "What's Hot" list for marketing and business development. In the 2010 list, social media slipped to eighth spot with the caveat that it's hotter than ever but with many firms reporting that results from social media are mixed along with comments that it is overhyped.

Many lawyers, who tend to be more risk-averse, will take a skeptical look at this newest of shiny things rather than jumping headlong into the social media fray. That's perfectly okay, since there are several factors that need to be taken into consideration.

Pluses and Minuses

"If someone is looking for someone like you, and you have a social media footprint, they'll find you." This was the message delivered by Mitch Joel, President of Twist Image and digital marketing expert at last November's Legal Marketing Association (LMA) conference in Toronto.

His observation is especially true since it's common knowledge that more than 70 per cent of lawyers are members of online social networks and corporate counsel use these networks to identify, evaluate and select outside legal advisors.

It's also true that social media is becoming overhyped. For example, the November LMA conference featured two speakers who each spent the morning talking about different aspects of social media. In the afternoon, a couple of social media tactical sessions were offered. Some of the attendees I spoke with viewed this topic weighting as overloaded and, while they found it interesting, also wondered whether there should be an easing back on the social media throttle.

Back in 2009, a panel of Toronto-based general counsel made the point that social sites like Twitter and Facebook are time-consuming, as are legal news feeds, even though they may contain good information. In their opinion, these types of social media tend to be dealt with by using the delete key. The following year, the comments had a changed tone with a different panel of in-house counsel saying they understood that social media communication was important and will probably become more so with a younger generation. This group also said they have little interest and less time to spend on social media, although they find industry blogs interesting.

Jeremy Grushcow, a partner with Ogilvy Renault LLP, is founder and co-editor of *The Cross-Border Biotech Blog*. He says, "I think it has provided many opportunities, or I wouldn't be doing it." Grushcow has been blogging since January 2009 and began tweeting six months later. His social media activity has become a cottage industry, and it's unlikely he'll stop anytime soon. "This is something that people come to do voluntarily. It's a pull, not a push," says Grushcow. "Students and associates being hired now are enthusiastic about it because they're of a generation used to speaking with each other this way."

The attraction, or "pull," of social media, he says, is different than the push of receiving a delete-able newsletter. "Social media comes to users because they're looking for it," he says.

As for deciding whether or not to communicate this way, he observes, "If your client audience isn't using social media, there's no point in doing this." And that's the litmus test. Some clients in some industries will be involved in social media and will value it while other clients in other sectors will not. If you don't have a sense of how your clients feel about it, all you have to do is ask and they will tell you.

Regardless of what your clients think, and even though you may not be tweeting, blogging or communicating on Facebook, it's safe to say that if you or your firm has a website and your bio is on it, then you already have a social media profile.

Should you wish to take your profile a step further, creating a profile on LinkedIn is a good place to start. I recently worked with a lawyer looking to build his practice by connecting with

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people personally one at a time. LinkedIn fit the bill exactly and it was suggested that he consider creating a profile and connecting with people he already knew. The measurement so far is that in the space of 10 days, his profile was complete and he had made 20 connections. It's now likely that, having made these initial connections online, the next step will be offline through face-to-face meetings.

The Social of Social Media

Social media networks provide tools for connecting and communicating, but they will not replace the intimacy of meeting and speaking with someone live and in person. Think of it this way: it's highly unlikely that the nuances of body language and richness of other non-verbal communication will ever be conveyed in a 140-character tweet.

And there really is no rush to join the fray. It may be that you'll become involved at some level, but as Grushcow observes, "It's not worth the trouble to influence someone." The bottom line is that you'll do it because you want to or need to.

A case in point is Queen Elizabeth II. Last November, the BlackBerry- and iPod-owning 84-year-old monarch became even more hip by launching the latest in a series of social media ventures by creating a Facebook page. This is nothing new for

the British Royal Family, which has had a social media profile for years. It kicked off with Buckingham Palace setting up a website in 1997 that now enables people to apply for palace jobs online as well as track the Royals via Google Maps and read about the Queen's corgi dogs.

Fast-forward 10 years and there's a video channel on YouTube, an account on the Flickr photography site, and early last year they joined Twitter. And now Facebook — even though you can't "poke" or "friend" the Queen.

All the Royal Family's advancements in social media happened because the public expected it, and therefore, the team supporting the Monarchy got its online act in gear.

This is certainly something to think about if you have clients active in the social media world. Perhaps some forms of social media may be in your future after all — even if you don't do it on a Royal scale.

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