

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a bright orange rectangular card. The hand is positioned at the top of the frame, with fingers gripping the top edge of the card. The background is a blurred image of a person in a white dress shirt and a patterned tie. The card contains white text.

SOCIAL NETWORKING

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A white, torn-edge paper strip is positioned horizontally across the bottom of the image. The word 'Herrmann' is written in a black, cursive script font on this strip.

Herrmann

Herrmann Advertising Design/Communications

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As the world of social networking tools expands exponentially, marketing professionals are scrambling to harness the potential such sites offer. Law firms are wondering whether to embrace the trend by officially jumping into the waters of cyberspace connections or watch from the sidelines until a verdict comes in.

However, the very nature of the Internet allows little time for indecision. What an individual, company or industry says or does today has instant impact – and widespread dissemination – thanks to real-time updates and the viral nature of social marketing tools like Twitter, LinkedIn, Legal OnRamp, blogs, Digg, RSS feeds and Facebook.

To tweet, blog, link, post and IM – or not – is no longer a decision left in the hands of a firm's marketing gurus. Your partners, attorneys, paralegals and staff are already doing it. And it's out there for your clients, prospects, competition, colleagues and other communities to see. Anyone who has identified themselves with your firm – as current or former employees – is now connected with you. For better or for worse, your doors aren't just unlocked, they've been flung wide open.

It's time to take stock of the fact that while technology has given us the tools to develop dynamic business and social connections with people we've yet to meet in person, it also has the potential of making our business and social lives more transparent than we may have experienced in the past.

What does all this mean to me and my firm?

As we explore social marketing tools, it is important to understand today's realities:

No longer can you spin your official response to a crushing defeat in court with a press release vetted by a dozen attorneys. Someone's already sent an instant message out from the courthouse steps.

Is that lateral you're anxious to recruit ready to leave her firm? Take a look at her LinkedIn page to see whether or not she's sending the message that she's "available." But before you extend an offer, take a moment to check out her Facebook page to see if there is anything that may give you pause.

Want to track what's really going on inside the corporate environs of your longtime client or that prospect you've been eyeing for years? Sign up to monitor blogs and RSS newsfeeds to see what's being said about you and your competitors. The posts and the responses you'll view are good ways to gather corporate intelligence.

Was it a coincidence that you just happened to join up with the prospect you've been pursuing for ages at the golf course? Or, did the fact your mutual friend's Twitter update about having to pull out of his regular foursome at the last minute tee you up to take his place?

It's no secret that law firms are generally behind the curve when it comes to embracing new ways of doing business. It's also no secret that individual lawyers – and those who are loyal to them – form the core of a firm's assets. Bring in a rainmaker and reap the rewards.

Today's summer associates (and hopefully tomorrow's rainmakers) are already building visibility across social networks. Harnessing that power by helping them build their image and gain professional stature within their distinct and intersecting spheres will help drive future revenue.

Likewise, it's important to demonstrate to those who come late to the dance that it's easier than they realize to fill up their cards. Online introductions are here to stay.

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Where do the big fish play in the virtual world?



Two social networking platforms that hold growing significance in the corporate and legal world are LinkedIn and Twitter.

With a network of more than 30 million professionals from 150+ industries, LinkedIn is where many attorneys have found their online “comfort zone.” This is social and professional networking at its finest – business development, shameless self promotion and name-dropping are encouraged. By inviting those you know and do business with to join your “network” of colleagues, you can quickly appreciate just how close you are to people from virtually every industry and corner of the globe. More business-oriented than Facebook, it's the place where presidents and CEOs mingle with producers and scientists.

So just what is the potential reach of a single individual? Someone with fewer than 40 1st degree “connections” might find it surprising to learn they are separated by no more than three degrees from more than 300,000 other LinkedIn members. In other words through your colleague, Tom (a 1st degree connection), you could ask to be introduced to Mike, his college roommate-turned-entrepreneur (a 2nd degree connection). Once established, your connection with Mike could then be nurtured so that you could connect with Pat, Chris and Sandy (3rd degree connections) – the venture capitalists he relies on who just happen to run the company your firm has been trying to woo for years.

One distinct advantage of LinkedIn is the fact that members can include links to their companies' Web sites. A law firm, company, association, club, college or virtually any organization can also form a group (the administrator has the option of “approving” those who request to join). Members can then choose to add the logos of the groups to which they belong on their profile pages. One can search for old friends, colleagues and others via name, company, industry, location, group membership and other key words. Members can also choose to accept or reject invitations to “link in” with individuals as well as delete connections at a later time if the association with a person or group is no longer desired.



In less than three years, Twitter has become one of the world's leading conduits of information. It's played a huge role in connecting users as they go about the mundane tasks in their lives and is finding itself used as a lifeline for those who witness serious world events. It has been widely reported that when the earthquake struck China in 2008, news of the event broke on Twitter before it made the wire services. More recently, those trapped in Mumbai as terrorist attacks were staged throughout the city exchanged information that may have saved their lives and kept relatives and colleagues informed.

Twitter users send short messages of 140 characters or less – known as “tweets” – out via their mobile device's text messaging programs, instant messaging services or the Web. Users' tweets provide the answer to the age-old question, “What are you doing?” without waiting to be asked. Those who “follow” you can easily be learn what you're up to – or choose to ignore your updates – at will.

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It's the tool that Larry the Lawyer uses to tell his friends he's watching kids play soccer one Saturday afternoon and preparing documents to file with the court that evening. It lets colleagues at the convention know you're in the hotel lobby so they can find you and begin networking. But when Larry, or Linda, or lots of others in your firm get together and start tweeting about the big night they are having at the local watering hole, it may not be what your firm had in mind when it comes to harnessing the power of social networking tools for marketing. With Twitter, there's nothing that stays in Vegas ... or in Valley View or Valparaiso.

That said, many professionals say that Twitter and LinkedIn are invaluable. They are used to jump start business relationships by providing entrees that would have been difficult to come by (much less cultivate) just a few years ago. Establishing a common bond through a mutual friend, alumni base or even a shared interest in sports, music or hobby, often leads to long and mutually beneficial collaborations.

Who's on first?

While LinkedIn and Twitter are fast becoming mainstream in the world of social networking, the field is wide open for law firms to establish themselves as masters of this new frontier. No clear leader has emerged today, but many are making up for lost time. Determine if your HR department needs to establish guidelines for your employees. But forget about any edicts designed to force your folks to the sidelines. That horse is out of the barn.

At the minimum, every single employee – from the mailroom clerk to the firm's chairperson – should be reminded that what they do and what they say online will likely be seen and commented upon by others. There is no upside in posting something that might result in embarrassment or loss of business.

One thing is certain: this is an area where some action is preferable to no action. If you're not in the game, it's time to venture out. You need to be aware of the possibilities as well as the pitfalls that lie ahead. See who's out there from your firm. See which site is attracting your friends. See where your clients are congregating. Once you've seen for yourself what's out there, it will be much easier to develop social networking strategies that make sense for you, your firm and your attorneys.

Take the plunge!

Here are some steps you can take that will allow you to explore the world of social marketing. Taking the plunge will give you a handle on how your attorneys are using it; what others are saying about you; competitor information; alert you to any reputation management issues that are brewing; and give you a good awareness of the buzz that individual lawyers, legal trends and hot topics generate every day.

TIP #1: Google yourself, your firm and associates ... and repeat this exercise using every major search engine.

If individual lawyers have higher rankings on Google, MSN, Yahoo! and other search engines than your firm enjoys, then those lawyers are likely involved in more social/professional online networking than your firm is. That's not necessarily a bad thing – after all, their ability to network is directly related to their ability to attract business – but make sure your firm is being presented the way you'd like it to be if the attorney is actively posting information online that is intended to bring in the bacon.

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TIP #2: Put your ear to the ground.

Monitor buzz about your firm and your competition by using tools such Google's alerts service, reader and blog search. Integrate the RSS feeds you want to monitor regularly into a single daily alert. Ask your colleagues and friends what they use to keep informed or try these tools:

<http://www.google.com/alerts>
<http://www.google.com/reader>
<http://blogsearch.google.com/>

Recently we learned through one of the "alerts" we receive that a lawyer with a major national firm purchased a home in a suburb of a major metropolitan city. The alert directed us to a Web page that provided detail on who sold the property, the purchase price, a photo of the home and the purchaser, the address, a map, and other information about the purchaser. In other words, we learned a lot about his personal life and financial situation. While the firm and the attorney may not be able to control what's out there, it's always nice to know before you're blindsided.

TIP #3: Sign up for a LinkedIn account. Create an official "group" for your firm with its own profile and logo.

The sooner you create an official LinkedIn "group," the better off you'll be. As the gatekeeper of the group, you can create and manage your firm's official profile and have the right to allow/deny those who want to "join" your group. By including a firm logo, all those who are members of your group can choose to display it within their personal profile. Ignoring this resource may result in someone else creating a group under your firm's name and using it as a lightning rod for less-than-positive commentary.

TIP #4: Set up a Twitter account.

Begin "following" people you know professionally, socially and/or in your other communities. Keep up to date on trends by following those who have (or are in the process of) establishing themselves as thought leaders and experts on topics you are interested in. Tweets tell you about a new blog posting or Webcast. They'll also let you know that someone is grocery shopping. Choose to listen – or not – at your discretion.

One CMO at a West Coast firm said she uses Twitter to create stronger bonds with individuals who may not have the opportunity to know her likes/dislikes outside the office.

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TIP #5: Review your employee's profiles.

You've heard that Human Resources professionals at all the major corporations (and not-so-major employers) routinely check out sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube and MySpace to see if their prospective new hires are exhibiting online behaviors that may preclude a job offer. We suggest that you do the same – using your firm's name and the names of those who work for you. And do it NOW.

Hopefully, you won't find anything particularly scandalous. However, you may find a partner's profile littered with grammar and spelling errors. You may find a particular attorney's profile continues to concentrate on areas of the law that you no longer want to promote. You might also find someone has inflated their experience or qualifications to the extent that it may jeopardize the firm's reputation. This is the time to be proactive in providing guidance. Keep in mind you may not be able to force removal of objectionable material, but you should be able to drive home the message that you take reputation management seriously and are actively monitoring online behavior and postings.

When there is breaking news that is (or can be) tied to your firm, journalists will dig into what individuals (especially current and former employees) have posted on their respective social networking sites. They'll then compare that information with the sanitized version contained on an employer's official site. Anyone who can't remember the last time this happened only has to recall how quickly the profile of Sarah Palin's future son-in-law was discovered; how a DC law firm employee was connected to a major prostitution ring; or the many instances of corporate red faces that have resulted when videos of company meetings or parties became favorites on YouTube.

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HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF LINKEDIN & TWITTER NETWORKING

LinkedIn and Twitter, two of the most prominent social media tools used by attorneys and law firms, have tremendous business development potential. In order to realize that potential, professionals should first ascertain their online presence complies with the firm's policy on social networking, especially as it applies to attorney-client privilege, providing legal advice or other areas of conduct.

The following tips are intended to provide a checklist for attorneys and other firm professionals who wish to ensure their profiles and postings are designed to maximize business opportunities and potential referrals.

LinkedIn:

LinkedIn is primarily a platform for business networking. It is best used to share your online resume, specialties, upcoming speaking engagements and publications, professional seminars and business events that you'll be attending and links to articles and information that you think may be of interest to colleagues, clients and prospects. While the occasional update about a purely social or personal topic helps give your profile personality, it is generally not the place to post your family's photos or controversial social/political opinions (unless, of course, you're a lobbyist). For social networking, we recommend using Facebook, a more appropriate medium for anyone who is not in your professional sphere.

To get the most out of LinkedIn, we recommend:

1. Post a succinct, yet complete, profile that highlights your experience and qualifications. If you have a particular specialty such as litigation, corporate securities or intellectual property, do include it ... but only if you wish to expand that area of your practice. If you are phasing out of a particular practice area, stress your new area of focus.
2. Proofread your profile and all updates you post!
3. Post a link to your firm's Web site, but enter its actual name rather than allowing it to use the "My Company" default.
4. Add groups/associations with which you have an affiliation such as alumni organizations, your firm's official LinkedIn group site (if you have one), professional groups, etc. Note that you will need to wait for permission from the group's administrator to "join" most groups, thus most will not appear in your profile until this step has been completed. Add the group's logo if it is available and review/adjust the order in which your groups appear on your profile. Become active in these groups by posting information or links to articles/blogs that would be of interest to many group members.
5. Review your profile preferences carefully. Two key points to keep in mind: if you choose to keep your name "private," your profile may continue to be displayed to anyone who does a search on terms you use in your profile (e.g., your firm name).
6. You certainly may choose to keep your connections only visible to those who you connect with; however, remember this may defeat the purpose of true business networking. You want to know who your client's new General Counsel is connected to, don't you? This is especially valuable if you'd like identify mutual connections or influencers. Keeping your contacts under wraps is generally non-productive if you wish to maximize the business development potential of this powerful tool.

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7. Be selective regarding those who ask you to connect with them or those you invite to join your LinkedIn network. Frequently review the profiles and connections of those in your network to scan for familiar names and send invitations to connect as appropriate. If you feel someone's online behavior may be offensive or inappropriate to you or your valued connections, you can easily delete them from your list of connections.
8. Build your reputation as a thought leader by actively participating in conversations, answering questions and sharing information. Offer to introduce parties with common interests.
9. Occasionally review the LinkedIn area titled "Viewers of this profile also viewed ..." as this feature tells you where some of your profile's visitors went after looking at your site. You will see the names of people you know as well as those you do not. This feature may give you insight about other attorneys (at your firm or at a competitor firm) who may be attracting the attention of prospective clients; it may give you a clue regarding an opposing party on an upcoming case; or let you know you have may have a mutual acquaintance reviewing several familiar profiles. You will not, however, be able to identify the names of those who viewed your profile and then went on to view the profiles of the additional individuals identified.
10. Don't let your LinkedIn account fade from lack of care and feeding! Don't ignore invitations from those you'd like to connect with. Add updates that your connections may find interesting. Remember, many of your connections choose to receive regular updates about the comings and goings of their connections, so anything you add (including your new connections) will be relayed to them (if this is your preference and if they have enabled these updates). This keeps your name in front of these people and it alerts any mutual associates that you are a LinkedIn member.

Twitter

The microblogging site, Twitter, is one of the fastest growing social networking tools in today's virtual world. It's used for a variety of purposes – social interaction, business networking, news and information sharing, rumor mongering, spamming, to retailing and everything in between. Like every other Web application, it has its legitimate users and its not-so-savory characters. It has a wide and influential group of followers from the legal community. Unlike LinkedIn, where your connections are based on who you know, those you follow on Twitter are a combination of people you know and people you'd like to know. Your followers may also be a cross-section of this population, but you also have the opportunity to block those who you may deem offensive or annoying.

Because you are limited to posting messages of 140 characters or less, many "Tweets" will include teaser text and offer a link to a blog or Web site where a longer story will appear. Postings often offer commentary about legal rulings or trends, comings and goings at firms, requests for legal commentary from journalists, opinions on legal services and advice on how to use the medium. Its instantaneous nature does elicit many off-the-cuff commentary that some have wished they could retract. While removing Tweets is possible, it is not as easily done (or as fast) as one might wish; think before you Tweet!

Here are some tips to get you started on Twitter:

1. Set up your Twitter account with your real name if you want to use it to elevate your visibility. Unless your colleagues, clients and others already know you as "GreatLawyer," it's best to identify yourself by your real name or a variation thereof.

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2. Identify what you do and where you do it in the brief profile. John Quincy Smith, whose Twitter name might be @JohnQSmith, could be described as “An IP litigation attorney at XYZ firm in Chicago.”
3. Select the appropriate settings for your account. If you are using it for business development purposes, we do not recommend that you make your Tweets or profile too restricted.
4. Use search terms that match your interests to find people to follow. In the case of Mr. Smith, “IP,” “intellectual property,” “Chicago law,” “XYZ” and any terms relating to the type of IP law he practices are appropriate. Many Twitterers have chosen to be notified when new people begin to follow them and this gives you the opportunity to gain a following for yourself if your interests match those you select to follow.
5. Save your most frequent search terms in your “favorites” category for ease of viewing.
6. If the number of people you are following far exceeds the number of followers you have (generally this number is 1000 or so), you may be restricted from following more people until your following grows.
7. Post Tweets that are interesting, thought-provoking, convey your industry knowledge or entertaining. Don't hesitate to add personal touches, as appropriate ... many new client relationships and business ventures begin as the result of a common bond of sports, recreation, vacation destinations, food, music, children or pets. However, don't let your “business” Twitter account become merely a social commentary. (Start a new account for that.) Become someone who is seen as a knowledgeable source of information – share links to interesting articles and blogs; offer to steer people to the right people/sources of information when they are seeking information; answer questions! Soon you will find others pointing to you as someone who is a subject matter expert!
8. If you are looking to expand your visibility as an expert commentator on a topic (first amendment rights or tax laws for example), make sure you use words in your Tweets that will attract the attention of legal watchers and journalists. If a major decision is due out, see who's online and join in the conversation. Re-tweet (RT) commentary that others have posted. Note that a “hot topic” may use a hashtag (#) before it to allow quick identification by others who want to follow what everyone is saying. (#Apple, for example, is often used when Steve Jobs is announcing major product introductions and system enhancements.)
9. Check your “@ Replies” daily. Those who have mentioned @JohnQSmith in their Tweets will appear here. This helps you see who is talking about you or repeated what you have said, regardless of whether you are following them or not. Engage others in a discussion by using their Twitter name “@MarySmith Is the Jones case decision expected today?” or “RT @MikeJones says estate tax changes mean big headaches.” Remember, you can only have a one-on-one (private) conversation with those who you follow and who, in turn, are following you; this type of Tweet is through a direct message (DM).
10. If your interests or topics are varied, and/or you are following a large number of people, you may want to categorize your incoming Tweets by using an application (e.g., TweetDeck) that allows you to sort by key terms or by the individuals you are following.

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WHAT YOU SHOULD CONSIDER WHEN ESTABLISHING A SOCIAL NETWORKING POLICY

1. Acknowledge the fact that many of your firm's attorneys and staff (as well as former and future employees) are already users of one or more social networking tools and platforms including blogs, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube.
2. Think twice before instituting Draconian bans on social media usage. Recent bans and blockages have resulted in widespread negative publicity; many restrictions were subsequently revised or lifted, but the initial damage to the brand must be rebuilt.
3. Conduct an audit of various social media to determine what is being said about your firm.
4. Be aware that many stories picked up by traditional media (radio, television, print) are originally broken over social media channels.
5. Review your firm's privacy and disclosure policies to ensure they adequately cover all online transmittal of sensitive information. Establish appropriate procedures to deal with leaks.
6. Provide all attorneys and staff with specific guidelines designed to protect the firm's reputation and its clients. Such guidelines should address how to avoid inadvertently entering into an attorney-client relationship; client confidentiality; disclosure of information that could compromise an ongoing case; sharing of internal information, announcements and rumors.
7. Acknowledge the power (positive and negative) of social media. Attorney blogs, Twitter postings and other online communications will attract attention of other bloggers and reporters. Establish compliance procedures for dealing with the media and coach attorneys on how to establish themselves as sought-after experts and build the firm's reputation.
8. Begin regular monitoring of social channels. Report on when, where and in what context your firm name and names of your key attorneys appear; monitor the competition; visit online profiles posted by those who work for you and those you're thinking of hiring; identify inappropriate postings, leaks and escalate concerns; spot "early warning signals" and sales opportunities; identify relevant trending topics to firm management.
9. Hold a "Social Networking Do's and Don'ts" forum for all attorneys and staff to illuminate how visible a person (and the firm) is on the social channels. Even profiles that are "protected" are not as invisible as one may think, especially when friends they have "authorized" have unprotected profiles and openly share photos and updates with their online communities. Relate "real world" examples of how firms, corporations and employees have stumbled and what one can do to avoid pitfalls. Share positive social networking experiences and how the media can contribute to business development and elevate an attorney's reputation as a thought leader in a particular industry or area of the law.
10. Establish an official firm presence on selected social networking sites. LinkedIn and Twitter are ideal starting points. Alert your attorneys of potential business development opportunities and contacts they may wish to pursue.