



Social media: how

Using online social networking tools to market your practice and law firm

In both their personal and work spheres, the world of Web 2.0 and online social media has become a huge part of many people's lives. As more and more people join social networks, make connections and post information about themselves, these services gain ever greater potential to become powerful marketing and networking tools for lawyers and law firms.

This article reviews how you can use social networking tools to market your practice and firm, and how they can be used as part of a formal marketing plan that includes traditional marketing tools and techniques as well.

Marketing 101

The goals of marketing and client development are to bring new clients to a firm and to retain and strengthen the relationship with existing clients. Don't forget that it is often easier to keep an existing client than to find a new one, so keep your existing clients in mind when you are using both traditional and social networking marketing tools.

Efforts at marketing legal services do not usually lead to instant results. Not everyone needs legal services at the moment. Good marketing will pay off, but generally only slowly and with a steady effort over the long haul. Therefore is it critical that you continuously market yourself, even when business is good.

Larger law firms usually have a complex marketing infrastructure that includes marketing committees and budgets. They market

at several levels, including firm, practice area and individual lawyer. Regardless of the size of his or her firm, every lawyer should dedicate some time each month to developing potential sources of business. An individual lawyer's marketing plan need not be lengthy or complex and is often more about making a commitment of time rather than a financial one. practicePRO's Managing a Better Professional Services Firm booklet includes a six-month marketing plan that will be suitable for most lawyers.

The practicePRO Lending Library (www.practicepro.ca/library) has several excellent books on marketing and client development that Ontario lawyers can borrow for free.

Referrals and trust

Sometimes an individual who needs legal services will be lucky enough to know a lawyer or get a personal referral to one. A personal referral is comforting to the person who is looking for a lawyer because he or she gets to rely on the referrer's knowledge of and trust in the recommended lawyer. The key here is trust – the referrer's trust in the recommended lawyer flows through to the person looking for legal help.

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But what happens when someone who is looking for a lawyer isn't lucky enough to know a lawyer or get a personal referral to one? They will jump on the Internet and do a Google search, and they will quite possibly also use social networking tools.

And social networking tools can be incredibly powerful here. Why? It goes back to trust. These tools give people all sorts of new ways to find out about lawyers (and even to provide or get a referral to one) from people in their social networks that they know and trust. Social networking tools enable you to expand your network of trusted contacts. This is why lawyers and law firms should be actively exploring the various ways they can use social networking tools to connect with existing and new clients.

Building a social media marketing plan

Jumping in and going crazy with 20 tweets a day on Twitter is dead easy, but probably won't get you many new clients. Your social media marketing efforts should not be *ad hoc*. They should be co-ordinated with your traditional marketing efforts, and you should use the social media tools that are going to connect you to the existing and potential clients you really want.

Family law, wills and estates, and residential real estate lawyers could look to sites such as Facebook that are widely used by members of the public. LinkedIn would be better for corporate and business lawyers looking to make professional contacts. In-house counsel looking to connect to other in-house counsel should join Legal OnRamp. People with similar interests can join virtual groups within these sites. These can offer the opportunity to demonstrate and promote your areas of expertise to people that may require your services at some point.

You also need to leverage the different ways that social networking tools can work together. For example, you can configure your blog so that posts on it are automatically tweeted to your Twitter friends and sent to your LinkedIn contacts. Most social media tools allow you to use an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed to push content directly to people interested in receiving it from you.

Increasing your online profile

Most lawyers have little or no online profile. This ignores two key facts. First, almost every client looking for a lawyer will use Google for a general search (e.g., "Sarnia real estate lawyer"). Second, any potential client who gets your name will Google you directly. Thus, you want to do everything you can to be more visible on the web, both when generic search terms are used and when someone specifically searches your name.

How do you make yourself stand out on the Internet? Understand who you are. What is your brand? What do your existing clients see and value in you and your firm? Look at what distinguishes your practice from that of your competitors. Are you recognized for your expertise within a given area of law or industry? Do you have specific transactional experience? Do you have a significant experience in a particular court or tribunal? Can you establish and market a niche area of practice? Can you claim to be the go-to person in a specific community (e.g., "practising real estate law in Scarborough for 20 years.")? Can you make yourself appear very knowledgeable by showing thought leadership or academic qualifications? This can be established by writing timely

commentary on current issues or new court decisions on your blog, or by appearing as a frequent speaker at continuing legal education programs.

Consider your existing reputation, strengths and brand, then take the answers to the above questions and craft a focused and consistent identity that will show people you have the experience and credentials that will help them solve their legal problems. Once you have that identity, use your website and the social networking tools to increase your profile.

Content is king

Helpful and practical content is one of the best ways to strengthen and bolster an online profile. Adding content to your website or blog on a regular basis is one of the best ways to make your online content more visible in search engines. The content you place online can be something about you, your practice, your area of the law, or just about anything else. It can be, depending on the circumstances, something that is completely personal (on sites such as Facebook), or it may have a business or commercial aspect (on sites such as LinkedIn).

A lot of the communication on social networks has a commercial aspect. In other words, it is people trying to sell something. This means there can be a high signal-to-noise ratio. This can make it hard to get your message through. Remember that people will ask, "What's in it for me?"

When posting online content, build credibility and gain trust by trying to inform or educate – not sell – and more people will more consistently read your message. Provide practical information and remind people of your expertise. This is how you get and keep your name at the top of their minds, which in turn will make them more likely to seek you out when they need legal services or when a friend or colleague in their social network asks them for a referral.

Getting started

Get a feel for the different features and content of the various social media tools. Identify which ones are being used by your existing and target clients and take a closer look at them. Keep in mind that different cultures and generations will look upon and use social networking tools in different ways.

Visit blogs that cover content in which you are interested. It could be blogs that clients or competitors have created, or blogs related to hobbies or other interests you have. Look at other legal blogs. Get a feel for the different styles and content. Once you are familiar with how they work, post some comments on other people's blogs to learn how they can be interactive.

You could also start by creating a Twitter account ([Twitter.com](https://twitter.com)) and following a few people. Twitter is currently the hottest Web 2.0 tool, and it can open a direct channel of communication to allow you to share information on a real-time basis with existing and potential clients.

To build an online beachhead, blogs are probably the best starting point as they give you greater visibility in search engines, especially if others link to your site. You can use a blog as the sole web presence for a solo or small firm. A medium to larger

firm will want to have a more traditional website to anchor its web presence, and one or more individual blogs to highlight specific practice areas.

How do you make your blog more popular? Post relevant and timely content that is interesting and helpful for people. Updating a blog two to three times per week is reasonable in most cases, unless big news or events are taking place. To lighten the demands of creating new content, recycle and repurpose existing content.

Newsletters aren't old-fashioned

Are newsletters old-fashioned? Perhaps, but if your clients like and want them, they are worth the effort. Can a blog replace a newsletter? It depends. For people who are social-network-savvy and know how to set up an RSS feed, a blog is the better way to go. And you can use Google's Feedburner to convert your blog's RSS feed into an email message for those who don't know how or want to use an RSS feed.

For those who like the newsletter format, services such as ConstantContact (www.constantcontact.com) and Industry Mailout (www.IndustryMailout.com) allow law firms to easily create and publish professional looking electronic newsletters.

Podcasts

Podcasts are another option for marketing yourself online. Podcasts are audio or multimedia (audio and video) content distributed

via the Internet to computers or portable media such as iPods. The key advantage is that they allow people to listen or watch when and where they want. Podcasts often feature an interview or banter between two people. They can be cost-effective relative to in-person visits, and they can make more of an impression than brochures or simple websites, but they are time-consuming and expensive to produce. Law firms that produce podcasts will typically do one per month that is 15-20 minutes long.

Video messaging and news

Thanks to faster download speeds and new technologies that will allow better quality audio and video, Internet video will be the "next big thing" in online marketing. Over the next few years you can expect video-based blogs and web-based programming similar to television programs. This content will up the ante on what prospective clients will look for and expect from their lawyers. They will make the YouTube videos we watch today look as dated as Super 8 film clips from the 1960s.

The world of marketing legal services has changed. Don't get left behind – start using social media tools to market your firm and practice.

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Social media at work



LAWPRO's new electronic communication initiatives

Three new e-newsletters get more information to you more quickly and cost-effectively

LAWPRO has introduced three new electronic newsletters to communicate with you more quickly, effectively – and economically.

- *LAWPRO Alert* will be used for urgent messages, such as imminent deadlines, a fraud scheme that has just come to our attention or other breaking information that we want to communicate to you as quickly as possible.
- *LAWPRO Insurance News* will be used to communicate information about upcoming filing deadlines and the insurance program.

- *LAWPRO Webzine* is our new electronic newsletter. Its focus is on bringing to your desktop the most current risk and practice management information from practicePRO. It will also serve as the electronic version of LAWPRO Magazine. The Webzine uses an easy-to-scan format of article headlines and one-sentence summaries. Each headline is linked to the corresponding full article in PDF format on the LAWPRO website (www.lawpro.ca).

(Note: For the time being, the printed version of LAWPRO Magazine will continue to be distributed to each lawyer. Later in 2010 we will