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Large firms: Take next social media steps

A few weeks ago I discussed the ways in which large law firms can use social media to create an effective firm-wide online presence by establishing firm profiles on the top three most traveled social media sites: LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

Once a large firm follows those recommendations and creates an effective enterprise-level presence online, the next step is to allow individual members of the law firm to interact on mainstream social media sites on a more personal level.

Of course, handing over the reins to individual firm members is an alarming proposition for many firms. There is a sense of loss of control of the message and fear of unforeseen conflicts and other public relations disasters.

Firms need to conquer their reluctance to allow individual members to engage on social media sites on behalf of the firm. Such personal interaction is the key to an effective online presence since people would rather hire other people to handle their legal matters — not large, impersonal, faceless institutions.

One way for a firm to test the social media waters is to choose a handful of select lawyers, such as younger associates and a few tech-savvy partners, to interact on social networking sites on behalf of the firm using their personal social networking personas.

One way to go about this is to form a committee that includes the lawyers the firm has chosen, along with a few other partners, whose function will be to set ground rules for interaction and monitor the online progress of those interacting online on behalf of the firm.

The attorneys engaging in social media on the firm's behalf should establish a basic online presence by ensuring that they've claimed and populated their attorney profiles on the main lawyer directory sites, such as Avvo (www.avvo.com) and Justia (<http://lawyers.justia.com/>). Creating the profiles is free, and simple, and the sites are well traveled by potential clients seeking attorneys.

Each lawyer also should create basic profiles on LinkedIn and Facebook. LinkedIn is important because, even if it's not used for online interaction purposes, it's an easily discoverable online resume at the leading professional networking site.

A Facebook presence is similarly important. Facebook makes

it easy for lawyers to connect with everyone they've ever known. Even if no other interaction takes place on Facebook, an online presence there allows lawyers to be found by, and stay on the radar of, the people that they've known from every stage of their lives.

After those basic steps are taken, each lawyer should determine where they intend to focus their online efforts. That decision will be based on their practice areas, target clients, geographic location and comfort levels with the different social media platforms. The decision-making process is not necessarily a simple one, and a more detailed examination of the factors to consider unfortunately, is outside of the scope of this column (but is covered more fully in the book that I co-author with Carolyn Elefant, "Social Media for Lawyers: the Next Frontier").

The nature of each attorney's interaction will be governed, in part, by the formality of the specific platform. As a general rule, LinkedIn is the most formal, with Facebook and Twitter being more informal.

The following social media interaction formula provides a general rule of thumb regarding the content of information shared across social networks:

- Approximately 50 percent of interaction should consist of the dissemination of content that is in your areas of practice and would be of interest to your followers, including links to blog posts, news articles and any other substantive online guides.

- 30 percent of interactions should consist of conversation with others, including commenting on the blog posts of others and responding to other people's posts on various social media sites.

- Blatant self-promotion is acceptable approximately 10 percent of the time, including links to content created by the lawyer or someone in his or her firm, news stories about the lawyer or the firm and updates about the lawyer's practice.

- Finally, 10 percent of interaction should include posts about the lawyer's personal interests, to the extent that the formality of the specific social media site permits it. Things to share include details about hobbies, such as mountain biking, wine or running,

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updates on favorite sports teams or comments regarding current events, movies or books. Sharing this type of information, to the extent possible, is imperative. It makes the lawyer appear more personable, approachable and memorable.

So give the chosen lawyers some space and let them engage online and hold monthly meetings to monitor their interaction and address any problems that may arise. Then, take stock of their progress. You may find that their online engagement has been far less problematic, and much more beneficial, than you

ever envisioned.

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