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Can lawyers afford to ignore social media?

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Social media is radically altering our world.

People of all ages are increasingly relying on the Internet and mobile-based tools to share, discuss, and disseminate information.

Lawyers cannot afford to be left out of the loop. Attorneys who successfully leverage social media tools to communicate, collaborate and network have a distinct advantage over those who don't.

It is not necessary for each and every lawyer in a firm to learn the ins and outs of social media. But at least one person, or group of persons, depending on the size the firm, should be familiar with emerging Web 2.0 technologies and the ways in which those technologies can help and harm their bottom line. Other lawyers in the firm likewise should be receptive and listen to their recommendations regarding social media.

You need look no further than the recent historic presidential election to see evidence of the far-reaching effects of social media. President-elect Obama's campaign used many forms of social media, including Facebook, Twitter and text messaging, to interact with and motivate supporters.

President-elect Obama has continued to connect with the public by harnessing the power of social media. A Web site (www.change.gov) designed to ease his transition into office was established within days of the election. The Web site incorporates a blog (www.change.gov/newsroom/blog), which provides information regarding the transition process and invites input from its readers.

A corresponding YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/user/ChangeDotGov), has been created, and includes videos of the weekly presidential address, as well as other events, such as the recent meeting of the Energy and Environment Policy Transition Team.

By using the latest technologies — readily available and affordable social media platforms — President-elect Obama, an attorney who will soon hold the highest office in the country, will connect and interact with millions of his constituents in a way never before seen.

The superiority of Internet technologies over many traditional methods was exemplified just last week Google announced that it was working with the Center for Disease Control to track flu trends. Google's Web site explained methodology behind the unique and

unprecedented collaboration (www.google.org/flutrends):

Certain search terms are good indicators of flu activity. Google Flu Trends uses aggregated Google search data to estimate flu activity in your state up to two weeks faster than traditional flu surveillance systems.

Such emerging social media trends are extremely important to lawyers, and lawyers who ignore them do so to the detriment of their practice.

Just ask Dallas attorney Dale Markland, a seasoned practitioner who received a crash course in the power of social media when a letter that was critical of him was widely circulated and discussed online. (nylawblog.typepad.com/legalantics/2008/10/by-i-am-sorry-i.html).

Shortly after that abrupt and awkward introduction to the viral effect of social media, Markland established an online presence of his own in a last ditch effort to control the potential damage to his reputation — www.marklandhanley.com/hurricane.html.

As he explained on the Web site, its primary purpose was to refute the allegations contained in the original letter: "On Sept. 26, 2008, a Houston attorney, Jeff Murphrey, sent a letter to me [Markland] related to his cancellation of a deposition in an on-going lawsuit that he and I were involved in. Someone sent that letter to internet blog sites and distributed it through mass emailings such that basically the entire world has had a chance to read Mr. Murphrey's letter, and apparently many have. ... This is my statement regarding the events and the contents of the letter."

Markland learned the hard way. Lawyers hoping to avoid his predicament would be well advised to stay abreast of the changing landscape of social media.

Knowledge is power. Smart practitioners will choose to learn about and appreciate the effect of emerging and affordable technologies upon the practice of law. Lawyers who fail to do so most certainly will pay the price.

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