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Social media latest networking tool for lawyers

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“Social media is an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio. ... Social media or social networking (one example of social media) has a number of characteristics that make it fundamentally different from traditional media such as newspapers, television, books and radio. Primarily, social media depends on interactions between people as the discussion and integration of words builds shared-meaning, using technology as a conduit.”

— Wikipedia entry for social media

All lawyers understand the importance of networking.

Interacting with colleagues, current clients and potential clients is a surefire way to increase business opportunities and referrals.

In the past, networking traditionally occurred in many forums, including events sponsored by bar associations or other professional organizations, on the golf course or while participating in community activities. Not all lawyers relished the concept of networking, but the general school of thought was that it was a necessary part of doing business, and staying cooped up in an office day in and day out was counterproductive to rainmaking.

With the recent explosion of social media and online networking opportunities, however, traditional notions regarding networking may no longer be applicable. The time-tested, traditional methods certainly still apply, but emerging social media technologies are expanding networking opportunities exponentially.

Social media appears in many forms, including e-mail, blogs, online forums and message boards. The ability to network with other lawyers and potential clients from the comfort of your office, on your own terms and your own schedule, is now a reality.

The only drawback to this new form of interaction is that it is not time tested, and its effectiveness has yet to be proven. Nevertheless, opportunities to network online are increasingly available and lawyers who ignore the possibilities do so to their own detriment.

Examples of social media applications that facilitate professional and social networking include Facebook, LinkedIn and, most recently, micro-blogs such as Twitter.

Facebook (www.facebook.com), likely the most well known of the three networking sites, originally launched as a social network for college students, but was opened to the public in Sep-

tember 2006. While it remains predominantly a social networking site, it can provide valuable professional networking opportunities for lawyers.

Over the last year, lawyers have flocked to Facebook in droves and created networking groups centered around various areas of practice. It is a cost-free and useful way to meet other lawyers from across the country and to re-connect with law school and undergraduate colleagues.

LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is a free online professional networking site that consists of a membership “of more than 20 million experienced professionals from around the world, representing 150 industries.” Its primary goal is to increase business opportunities for members by providing the ability to connect with potential clients, employees, employers and other members of their profession. LinkedIn has been around for a while now and shows promise. Only time will tell if it will live up to its potential as a professional networking resource.

One of the newer, emerging technologies seeing a huge amount of growth is Twitter (www.twitter.com). In my opinion, it is one of the most promising professional networking resources available.

Twitter is a free networking and micro-blogging service in which conversations occur in, at the most, 140-character snippets. Once a member, you can locate others with similar interests or backgrounds through a directory such as Twellow (www.twellow.com), then follow and reply to Twitter posts.

There has been a great influx of practicing and non-practicing lawyers onto Twitter in recent months, allowing for exchanges on topics such as recent court decisions and law practice management. In addition to facilitating law-related discussions, Twitter allows member to get a good feel for the people with whom they converse, since posts also include people’s thoughts regarding their day-to-day activities and current events.

Emerging social media technologies are leveling the playing field and changing the way lawyers interact and network. Time-tested and proven networking methods should not be abandoned, but astute attorneys will recognize the potential for increasing one’s professional network by taking advantage of free, online networking opportunities.

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