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LegalCURRENTS

A look at Google Plus 101 for lawyers, part 1

What is Google Plus?

Google Plus is Google's new social network. It was released in private beta on June 28 and had over 25 million users within four weeks. It was opened to the public in late September and it is now estimated that it has over 50 million users. To put that in perspective, consider that it took Facebook, which launched in 2004, nearly 3.5 years to reach that many users.

How is it different from all the other social networks?

Google Plus is a social network that was built from scratch after the other major networks were well established. As a result, it offers a number of unique features intended to address the complaints of users on other networks. These features arguably make it more appealing to professionals who wish to use social media as a business tool.

So, what are these new features?

First, Google Plus allows you to organize those that you follow into circles and then share information with just one circle, many circles or the public. For example, you can create circles called "legal professionals," "criminal defense lawyers," "family," "friends" and "clients." In other words, you can separate your clients from everyone else, thus solving a problematic issue for many lawyers who prefer to avoid sharing personal information with clients, but fear that they might offend clients by refusing a request to connect.

Circles make it easy to share and receive targeted information from your connections. You can share links and thoughts about legal issues with other legal professionals, personal information and family photos with friends and family, and links to content that might be of interest to lay people with your clients.

Another useful feature is the ability to engage in video conferences with other users using the "Hangouts" feature. To do this, you simply click on the "start a hangout" icon on the main page and launch the platform using your computer's webcam.

New collaborative features will soon be added to Hangouts, which will make this feature all the more useful for lawyers. These will include the ability to: 1) give a particular hangout a name; 2) share notes using a sketchpad; 3) use and refer to Google Docs and 4) share your screen with other participants. These added collaborative features will make Hangouts particularly appealing to lawyers who

may want to use Hangouts to conference with other attorneys or clients about a case.

Finally, compared to the other major social networks, Google Plus is particularly conducive to interactive, threaded discussions. It's easy to start a discussion and you can direct it to specific users whom you name in the post or comment, thus ensuring that they will be notified of the discussion and then have a chance to offer their two cents.

Is it really worth it to join yet another social network?

In my opinion, for many lawyers, it is. As soon as Google Plus came out, my gut instinct told me it was the next big social network. And, I feel even more strongly about it now that Google has rolled out a number of new features and opened up the platform to the public. Most importantly, Google has finally made its API available to third party developers, which means that it will be easier for users to work Google Plus into their daily work flow and make it quicker and easier for people to share and interact on Google Plus.

In my opinion, Google Plus is the place to be right now. Instead of following the herd to already well-traveled sites, why not invest time engaging on an emerging platform created by one of the Internet giants that has tons of potential? The other platforms are already flooded with lawyers and it's difficult to stand out from the crowd. Lawyers considering using social media to forward their goals would be wise to consider Google Plus while it's still in its early phase. Doing so will allow you to uniquely position yourself to take advantage of this emerging platform.

Tune in next week, when I'll explain how to set up an account and will give you tips and pointers on how to use some of Google Plus' features and will offer suggestions regarding how to interact and share effectively on Google Plus.

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