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Lawyers and new social media platforms

Social media is a rapidly changing phenomenon. New platforms are introduced all the time and old ones quickly fade away. Even for so-called “social media gurus,” it can be difficult to predict which ones will have staying power and which ones are mere fads.

It's clear that Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn aren't going anywhere, while one-time bedrock MySpace is rapidly losing ground. Friendfeed and GoogleBuzz, once the darlings of social media pundits, disappeared in the blink of an eye.

So when a new social media platform comes along that generates a lot of online buzz, some believe that it makes sense to jump into the fray early on in order to take fully take advantage of the opportunities that it presents.

The latest and greatest social media platform that's the talk of the (online) town is Quora (www.quora.com), which is self-described as a “continually improving collection of questions and answers created, edited, and organized by everyone who uses it.”

This site essentially allows users to ask questions related to any topic; other users then submit answers to questions that interest them. The format is intended to create a knowledge base of information provided by people uniquely able to answer the questions due to their very specific areas of expertise.

For the most part, at this early stage, the questions asked tend to revolve around technology issues, ranging from software development to social media to cloud computing. This is because the site is frequented primarily by the Silicon Valley set, developers and social media advisors galore.

So, the question remains: Does it make sense for lawyers to be among the first to use this site? Do lawyers who are so-called “early adopters” of Quora stand to benefit?

In my opinion, the answer is “no” — for most lawyers, using Quora at this early stage of the game would simply be a waste of time. I say this for two reasons.

First, I'm not convinced that Quora will be around for the long haul. The user interface is clunky and confusing. Questions from

topic threads that you subscribed to appear on your “home” screen, seemingly at random and you have to click through to read the answers provided. There is no search function, which makes it difficult to sort through the vast amount of data and locate those questions and answers that are particularly relevant to your interests. The bottom line: It's difficult to navigate the site and after spending about 5 minutes on it, I tend to experience information overload.

Second, for most lawyers, participation on Quora is pointless. Quora only makes sense for a minority of lawyers, including those lawyers whose target client base consists of technology geeks, software developers, or social media consultants. Lawyers who live in or near Silicon Valley would also benefit from participation.

But for the vast majority of lawyers, participating in Quora at this early stage in the game would be a huge gamble and an enormous time sink, with the likelihood of minimal returns for the time investment.

Sure, the Question and Answer format is a comfortable one for many lawyers. But that doesn't mean that Quora is necessarily a good site for lawyers. In my opinion, for the time being, lawyers who prefer this type of format would be better served showcasing their expertise by answering questions on LinkedIn or Avvo.com.

If, six months down the road, Quora is still alive and kicking, it might be worthwhile to consider participating on it. At that point the user interface should be drastically improved as well, making interaction on the site a more user-friendly and enjoyable experience.

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