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The evolution of intermedia

For many lawyers, one of the greatest deterrents to interacting online is a mistaken impression that online networking is a purely “social” endeavor.

After all, as a profession, lawyers tend to take themselves very seriously, and socializing most certainly is a waste of their time — especially since attorneys tend to carefully track and bill each and every moment of the work day.

Our profession’s misapprehension regarding the interactions forming the very basis of Web 2.0 platforms is understandable. After all, online interaction is referred to commonly as “social media,” a name that implies the vast majority of online interaction consists of gossip and inane conversation. That, simply, is an inaccurate characterization. Online interaction runs the gamut, of course, but an increasingly large segment of interaction involves business and professional endeavors.

It is for that reason so many influential people in the online space are increasingly expressing displeasure with the term “social media,” a limiting, simplistic and inaccurate term. Web 2.0 platforms with built-in interactivity such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn are being used more widely to conduct business, in promotional efforts, advertising and networking as well as hiring.

Accordingly, “social media” is much too shallow of a term. It fails to encompass the depth of online professional interaction and the sheer number of business transactions that occur on the “social” Web on a daily basis, as evidenced by recent statistics regarding the increasing use of “social media” platforms by companies and consumers:

- Social Media has overtaken porn as the top ranked activity on the Web.
- 80 percent of companies are using LinkedIn as a primary tool to find employees.
- 25 percent of search results for the world’s top 20 largest brands are links to user-generated content.
- More than 1.5 million pieces of content (Web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) are shared on Facebook daily.
- There are more than 200 million blogs online.
- 34 percent of bloggers post opinions about products and brands.
- 78 percent of consumers trust peer recommendations.

- Only 14 percent of consumers trust advertisements.

Sources for those statistics can be found at the Socialnomics blog, <http://socialnomics.net/2009/08/11/statistics-show-social-media-is-bigger-than-you-think>.

The statistics support the premise of the following quote, one of my favorites, from a February article published by Business Week, “Debunking Six Social Media Myths”: “For companies, resistance to social media is futile. Millions of people are creating content for the social Web. Your competitors are already there. Your customers have been there for a long time. If your business isn’t putting itself out there, it ought to be.”

Of course, as I’ve already pointed out, lawyers continue to resist online engagement, in part because the perceived “social” aspect of online interaction seems silly and superfluous. For that reason, I propose that in the future the term “intermedia” be used, instead of “social media.” It is a more serious, palatable term — one that lawyers and other professionals resistant to emerging technologies more likely would accept.

Intermedia also better encompasses the depth and breadth of online interactions. It is another word for “interactive media,” which I view as the next — or, perhaps, current — stage of the Internet. Intermedia is where the world interacts, interconnects, interfaces, interweaves, intervenes and intersects. It is intergenerational, the intermediate, or next step, between what was and what will be. “Inter” means “put to rest” — and intermedia effectively has “put to rest” or ended old school, one-way broadcast media.

The language used to describe new concepts is important because it shapes our dialogue and perceptions. The terms used to discuss the Internet and online interactions should evolve as quickly as the medium itself. Otherwise, the adoption of emerging technologies will be delayed — especially in fields like the legal profession, which traditionally are skeptical and suspicious of new technologies and therefore are slow to adapt.

The terminology used to discuss the phenomenon of online interaction must change, and quickly. The use of “intermedia” or a similar term in place of “social media” is the first, and most important step, in that evolution.

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