

# THE RECORDER

## Easy as One, Two, Click

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Image: courtesy photo

When Los Angeles-based attorney Steve Weinberg got two referrals through LinkedIn, he was intrigued. Like many attorneys and other professional services providers, he'd had a LinkedIn page for years. But when one of the referrals turned into a piece of business, Weinberg was sold.

The fact is that businesses largely dependent on lead generation are thriving online. Legal and accounting services are poised to be the next big marketplaces and will likely surpass insurance and other financial services on the web. The key? Social media, and the numbers are staggering. LinkedIn alone has more than 75 million profiles. Sixty percent of all Americans use social media at least once a week and 80 percent at least once a month. We're tweeting more than a billion times a month, and the number of page views for social media sites grab a larger percentage of time spent online, with estimates at 10 to 25 percent of Internet usage and doubling each year.

Law firms and attorneys — notably among the most risk-averse professionals — are beginning to recognize the need for social media strategies, especially as a way to recruit top law school graduates, communicate with existing clients and reinforce their firm's expertise. Yes, the social media horror stories still deter many. It's difficult not to key in on young associates who post job descriptions of "slave," "whipping boy" or "corporate gangster" on their Facebook pages, or publish photo albums of beer pong exploits read by another attorney or the firm's largest client.

While it will never be completely risk-free, a clear social media policy can mitigate much of the danger and help a firm build its reputation and business with powerful new tools. Twitter, firm-branded blogs and social media news releases help raise a firm's online profile at a time when many people use Google, rather than Martindale-Hubbell, when looking for a lawyer. More people also research an

attorney's name over the firm name, so it's equally important to build individual partner and associate profiles that help extend their personal brands to new markets.

Bylined articles, newspaper articles quoting partners and recognition on legal rankings and lists can be publicized on a firm's blog and tweeted to a building community of followers. Whether each attorney should have a Twitter account depends on what they have to talk about. Anyone can host a talk show on YouTube these days, and if it's good, people will watch it. If the attorney has something interesting to say on Twitter or their personal blog, people will find them.

Before a law firm or attorneys commit to Twitter, they should make sure they're willing to devote at least a few hours a week to it. They should post regularly — always inserting their voice and not merely regurgitating information — follow other people and get involved with the budding community they're developing. If they're not willing to engage in discussions and tell people what they really think, Twitter probably isn't worth the time.

Savvy prospective clients want engaged attorneys and expect them to be familiar with social media as well. Ever notice how many people you meet at events invite you to connect on LinkedIn? They don't just put contacts in their Outlook address book anymore because contacts have gone the way of the Rolodex. LinkedIn is a living, breathing network that requires only a few minutes a day to effectively manage and expands the business development world much like Match.com expands the dating pool.

In addition to being an active source of referrals, LinkedIn's "Groups" allow professionals to create more intimate networks based on industry sectors and common interests. These groups foster discussions, provide up-to-date news and a second form of networking, as members connect with others in the same group. If privacy is a concern, members-only groups keep out the public, and discussions are not indexed by search engines nor are they shared on social networking sites. However, if increased visibility is the goal, open groups allow the general public to join discussions that are indexed and can be shared on Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites such as Delicious and Digg.

A firm's public relations effort also should include the social media news release (SMNR), which can be leveraged directly by firms. Numerous websites offer SMNR templates, including PitchEngine, Pressitt, RealWire and PRX Builder. Unlike traditional releases which are more narrative in nature, SMNRs are bulleted with facts, key messages and quotes, and focus on multimedia (pictures, video and audio) and hyperlinks to even more interactive materials. They also allow readers to easily take the release viral. An SMNR doesn't necessarily replace a traditional press release; it's an interactive online tool that allows readers to tout the news. SMNRs offer a quick read and make life easier for journalists who are under tight deadlines and just want the facts.

Wikipedia can be a powerful social media tool for a firm as well. Much care needs to be taken in the initial page submitted to Wikipedia's online editors, but once it has passed their initial scrutiny, readers

will help it grow as they add links, expand the firm's history and detail what makes them unique. The key is to focus on factual information about the firm and use original copy. Opinions and anything cut and pasted from another site will be flagged and is grounds for removal.

By now, even the most traditional institutions have conceded the currency of social media — often grudgingly, and it's not surprising. The new world of tweets, Facebook friends and google-me-please was not so much requested by the public as thrust upon it. People got used to the young Internet and took it for granted. They forgot it is still growing up, and now like a hungry teenager it confounds them with its own unruly energy and unlimited future.

The number of baby boomers has already been eclipsed by generation Y, and 96 percent of that emerging demographic is engaged in social media. Meanwhile, four out of five U.S. companies are using social networking to find and attract candidates. Advertisers have noticed too. Social networks globally will top \$3.3 billion in advertising revenues in 2010, up from \$2.5 billion in 2009 — a 31 percent increase, according to recent estimates from eMarketer. Facebook is expected to lead the charge with \$1.3 billion.

The advice for law firms is, don't wait. Start your firm's social media dialogue by setting up Google Alerts and Twitter alerts, also known as "TweetBeeps," and begin actively monitoring what others are saying about you. Reporters looking for trends, story ideas and expert sources scour the Internet using social media tools. At the same time, firms can reach the media and ultimately prospective clients using searchable databases such as MuckRack, which lists the Twitter accounts of top journalists and helps attorneys follow and engage a specialized group of beat reporters and editors. The rise of Internet networking is not just a technological phenomenon. It reflects a deep change in society from bridge, bowling clubs and family mall trips to a mall online. We travel there alone, just as we watch television alone — increasingly not even on a TV but on laptops, cell phones and other portable devices. Social networking is here because it fills a new void in business and private life. It may take some getting used to, but it's far better to be introduced electronically than not to be introduced at all.

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