

Marketing softly with social media

by Kristi Tousignant

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Though using social media to generate discussion is trending among local lawyers, attorneys said law firms don't have to "friend" these Internet tools to succeed.

Maryland attorneys said they are using social media to generate dialogue about their areas of law and establish a community. The marketing aspect of Facebook and blogs are secondary, they said, and new clients and business are just an added benefit.

Many attorneys said social media is simply another optional marketing tool, but not a requirement for a modern law firm.

"This town is full of very successful lawyers who don't tweet," said Ronald J. Drescher of Drescher & Associates P.A. in Baltimore. "I don't think you have to do social media."



'I think if you go into this thinking you are going to market yourself, you will end up with an inferior product,' says P. Andrew Torrez, one of the attorney/editors of Zuckerman Spaeder's new 'Suits by Suits' blog. 'That is anti-marketing.'

Blogging business

Zuckerman Spaeder LLP, which has offices in Baltimore and Washington, launched a blog called "Suits by Suits," about legal disputes between companies and executives.

"We want dynamic content that is interactive and speaks to the business community," said P. Andrew Torrez, a partner at the firm's Baltimore office.

Torrez said he and a few other newer partners and an associate were swapping stories about cases they had in the past or were working on at the moment. He said they realized it would be interesting to delve into the issues presented in these cases with a blog. The group started planning the business blog in January.

The law firm started blogging in June, but did not start advertising its posts until a few weeks ago. Torrez said he and the three other attorneys spearheaded the blog and wanted a few months to practice writing before spreading word to the public.

"I do have a lot of cases where these are real issues that we face every day," Torrez said. "I think we all felt a need to participate in that."

Torrez said he and the other three editors take turns writing for the blog, on which they aim to post every day. The attorneys blog about corporate legal issues in the news. Torrez said the blog's goal is to delve into the legal questions behind the headlines.

"I don't want to take credit for the news," Torrez said. "Our role is to go out and see

newsworthy items from a legal perspective.”

Torrez said the secondary purpose of the blog is to market the firm. He said the firm’s main goal is to engage the business community in a dialogue through its blog posts.

“If you do good work, people are receptive and come back to you,” Torrez said. “The marketing aspects are secondary.”

Torrez said he and the team of editors want to avoid stale content on the blog.

“I think if you go into this thinking you are going to market yourself, you will end up with an inferior product,” Torrez said. “That is anti-marketing.”

Torrez said it was too early to tell whether the blog had attracted any new clients.

“We are still at the early stages,” Torrez said. “We want to develop a quality product first.”

Expert advice

Jennifer Ellis, vice president of Freedman Consulting Inc., who consults with law firms across the country on technology, said law firms should be using social media for marketing, research and networking.

“I find a lot of lawyers who don’t have websites yet,” said Ellis, who is located in Lansdale, Pa. “They need to do that first. Once they are done with that, they need to use social media to support those websites. If used appropriately, social media is extremely effective.”

She said firms can use all forms of social media in conjunction with each other to cross-market the firm.

“Writing a blog is recommended,” Ellis said. “Then they can connect it to the website. Then they use that blog to push content on their social media site. That way, they provide useful and relevant information to potential clients. They then take that and put it on Google+ or Facebook and bring people back to blog posts to read it.”

The biggest mistake attorneys make when it comes to social media is not following through, Ellis said. These lawyers will create Facebook pages and never post on them, Ellis said.

“You have to actually make an effort, which can be hard because attorneys are busy,” Ellis said.

To avoid this, Ellis recommended crafting a social media plan. Ellis said firms should map out who posts or updates social media sites at what time and how often.

“It’s just another task that becomes part of their day-to-day lives,” Ellis said. “You have to find time to do it.”

Cross-marketing

Ellis recommended lawyers talk about their pro bono work on their social media outlets, which is exactly what Drescher has done.

“It can be intimidating for a lot of people to hire a lawyer,” Ellis said. “One of the things social media allows us to do is tell people who we are as human beings instead of just who we are as lawyers.”

Drescher, who practices mostly bankruptcy law, launched a campaign this month to draw people to his Facebook page as well as raise money for the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service. For every visitor that “liked” his firm’s Facebook page, Drescher pledged to donate \$1

to MVLS and would donate an extra 50 cents if the same person liked MVLS' Facebook page.

Drescher spread the word on his website, Twitter, email and even put an ad on Facebook. So far, he has received 100 "likes" on his Facebook as a result.

He said the effort is a way to give back as well as draw people to his page who normally would not see it.

"You are not going to get as many 'likes' on a lawyer page as Comedy Central's page," Drescher said. "You just have to accept that."

Drescher brought his social media efforts into full swing in April. Drescher blogs, tweets and posts to Facebook. His most effective tool, however, is YouTube, he said.

Once a week, Drescher films himself answering a question related to bankruptcy law. The videos run for two to three minutes and get between 700 and 750 views per month.

Drescher, however, said while social media works for him and his firm, it is still not a requirement for everyone. Law firms, Drescher said, still rely on traditional outreach like taking clients to golf games. Drescher said he and his wife bake dessert bars every holiday season and send out 125 boxes to colleagues and clients.

"There's a lot of people who don't want to be bound to their computer or smartphone," Drescher said. "Ultimately, it's just human contact filtered through technology."

Drescher said he chose to use social media because he is already somewhat of a tech junkie and enjoys it.

"If it's not going to be fun, don't do it," Drescher said. "No one should do this because they feel like they have to. I think that is a mistake."

A question of practice

Some law practices lend themselves to social media better than others, Ellis said — for example, consumer and business law.

Jason Ostendorf of the Law Office of Jason Ostendorf LLC in Owings Mills has been blogging since February. He specializes in divorce and consumer protection.

"There are a lot of consumers who are not too informed about what is going on with banks and consumer issues," Ostendorf said. "I wanted to bring to light certain things going on in that area. I wanted to give free information for people who can't get a lawyer, to, hopefully, help them handle their case."

Ostendorf said he has had clients call for a consultation based on a blog post they read.

"In this age of Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and everything else, it's very counterproductive for a lawyer not to take advantage. Is it the most productive thing for firms? No. Traditional marketing brings in the bulk of the business."

He said social media brings in 15 to 20 percent of his business.

"It does have some marketing effect," Ostendorf said. "It's clearly helpful. All lawyers should be doing this if they are not already. But what prompts me to blog is more of a hobby than a marketing tactic."

Ostendorf also said he never worries about giving away free legal advice on his blog.

"The legal profession is a business, but it's not a business," Ostendorf said. "It's a business

that sort of owes something to the public. It's a noble profession. When you can help people out in your profession, do it."

Social media veterans

James J. Gross, of Thyden Gross and Callahan LLP in Chevy Chase, said he thinks he has the oldest divorce blog in Maryland.

Gross has been blogging since June 2005. He used to hand out a pamphlets with information on divorce, writing that later evolved into his blog.

"This just became another place to write and educate the public about divorce," Gross said.

Aside from word of mouth, Gross said, the blog is the law firm's chief marketing tool.

"It is essential for lawyers to be doing this nowadays," Gross said. "Once you write a blog, then it's on the Internet for 2 billion people to see if they want to and it remains there forever."

Attorney Eliot M. Wagonheim of Wagonheim Law in Hunt Valley has taken advantage of social media for three years.

"They say the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, and the second best day is today," Wagonheim said. "I wish I'd started it earlier."

Wagonheim blogs, uses Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and recently delved into Pinterest. The firm sends out an email every week, as well, with articles written by Wagonheim.

"It is not essential," Wagonheim said. "I think it's an advantage if you want to build a business depending on what business you are trying to build."

Wagonheim blogs once a week about business issues that would interest potential clients. He said he will take news stories and blog about the business lessons that can be gleaned from them.

"I write about what matters to me," Wagonheim said. "Small to mid-size business is not just what I do, it's what I have a passion for."

While Wagonheim said he has received positive feedback about the blog, he hasn't had clients who found him solely based on his posts.

Wagonheim said his goal is to generate a dialogue, but also to market the firm.

"The best of what we do as lawyers is communicate," Wagonheim said. "Here is a dynamic range of options. To turn a blind eye seems foolish."



'They say the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago and the second best day is today,' says Eliot M. Wagonheim, who has been blogging for three years. 'I wish I'd started it earlier.'

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