

TECHNOLOGY FOR THE LITIGATOR

Newsletter Articles

Social Networking for Lawyers—You're Invited!

By Christy Burke

Whether you realize it or not, there is a party going on—online! Social networking for lawyers is exploding, and many attorneys are enthusiastically joining in. The big question is: Are you the life of this party, the wallflower waiting in the corner waiting for an invitation, or have you opted out of attending altogether?

The Internet has created an overwhelming communication environment for all professionals, and attorneys are no exception. Take your daily avalanche of email, and then pile on blogs, web content, Twittering, and social networking communications. The enormous variety and volume of online correspondence leaves many lawyers asking, "Where do I begin?" Others may be saying, "I've begun, but how do I find the time—or strength—to continue?"

Not all social networking sites are created equal. In fact, each site has its own unique position and purpose. Both Facebook and LinkedIn are free of charge and both let you adjust your account settings to allow or block certain activity from other users, but the two sites are vastly different in their application.

Facebook first gained popularity among high school and college students who were keeping tabs on their classmates. It is informal and fun, giving you the opportunity to post photos of your family, your dog, to write on someone's virtual wall, or even throw virtual pies or sheep at your friends.

Alternatively, LinkedIn is the more staid business-oriented social networking site where you can advance your career, exchange endorsements, and get introductions to potentially useful business contacts. You can search for people based on your job and education history to connect with people you went to college or graduate school with, or to find former or current work colleagues or prospects.

Attorney David Schnurman is president of Lawline.com, a provider of online CLE courses, and he also produces the Legal Beat blog. According to Schnurman, "Social networking can be done the right or the wrong way. It's so overwhelming and there are so many sites that some lawyers find it easier to just stay out of the game."

Schnurman notes that LinkedIn and Facebook are both great tools for attorneys, but he uses them differently. "LinkedIn is useful for trying to meet someone new, and it's business-related. On the other hand, Facebook gives me the ability to build a huge network of my friends and family, and to connect with people I've met in real life." Schnurman says that he has also used Facebook to find CLE faculty members for Lawline.

On the receiving end, Schnurman actually gives priority to the messages he receives through Facebook, reading them before the ordinary emails he receives. "I get about 300 emails a day. A personalized message from Facebook from a business contact stands out—I'm more likely to read it."

Anne Marie Bowler of Gabay-Rafiy & Bowler LLP finds Facebook provides her an easy way to notify former colleagues and friends that she's a lawyer who started a law practice. Bowler says, "Facebook is 'in your face' marketing—without even making much effort or paying for postage. I have received numerous follow-up calls from old friends who need lawyers, or from

other lawyers who need help on a case, all through exposure on Facebook.”

Many lawyers report frustration with social networking because it can become a constant distraction. Jayne Navarre is a social media analyst and consultant to the legal industry and founder of LawGravity. She studies the benefits of social networking tools, and realizes that lawyers have trouble keeping up with them. “Social networking can be a disruptive technology, unless you manage your time. Lawyers who have success with social networking usually set aside a specific amount of time per day or per week so that it doesn’t take over their lives.”

Navarre agrees that LinkedIn and Facebook are great places to start, and adds that legal-specific websites like Legal OnRamp are also useful to build referral networks. “Online networking is no different than networking in the bricks-and-mortar world. In the physical world, there are various meetings and events competing for your time, and it’s the same on the Internet.”

Navarre explains, “LinkedIn is like a general business network—equivalent to a chamber of commerce or trade association in the bricks-and-mortar world. Facebook is like your country club—it’s a place where you can let your hair down a bit and be more personal. Legal OnRamp is like a bar association, helping lawyers meet lawyers.”

“If lawyers can compartmentalize the various sites,” Navarre says, “they can leverage the huge advantage that the Internet gives them over and above what in-person meetings can provide.” Navarre explains that when you attend an event, you meet a few people and get their business cards. However, if you post one item online, it goes out to 50–60 people or more. You spend less time to make more contacts, and you don’t have to be physically present, which cuts down on travel costs, registration fees, and time expenditure.

Aviva Cuyler is an attorney who founded JD Supra, a free online publishing platform for legal work. Recognizing the growing legitimacy of Facebook for legal business development, she recently launched an application that allows her participants to automatically list documents and professional qualifications on their Facebook pages when they populate their JD Supra pages.

Cuyler recommends that lawyers wanting to use social networking tools for business development should focus rather than taking a scattershot approach. “Attorneys will get a better return on their social networking time if they come up with a plan that targets who they’re trying to reach and where that population is located. Pick two or three complementary online sites or activities where you believe you can make an impact, and invest your time and energy there.”

Internet business attorney David Snead believes strongly that lawyers need to be using the Internet aggressively as a business development tool. “Lawyers who are resisting technology are shooting themselves in the foot—there’s nothing to be scared of. That’s where the interaction is now.” Snead explains that his law practice has a very specific niche, so getting involved in his local community will get him zero clients. However, by marketing through social networking, he has many more options.

Snead believes that, while Facebook is less oriented toward business-building, it is a good tool for networking and demonstrating credentials. He explains that Facebook is ideal for following up with people he’s met at conferences. “About one-half to one-third of the people I meet at conferences are on Facebook, and I invite them to become my ‘friend.’ While this doesn’t necessarily make that person become a client right away, it establishes a more personal relationship with them and makes our next social interaction more friendly and familiar.”

Most lawyers are savvy enough to know that the social networking phenomenon is indeed going on, whether they are participating in it or not. Online communication is not going away—it’s flourishing, growing, and developing all the time. Whether your objection is time, fear, or disdain for technology, taking a few steps to launch your social networking presence is an important step for your client-development activity. So the next time you get that invitation to join the social networking party, perhaps consider saying “yes” rather than claiming to have other plans.

INSIDE THIS COMMITTEE

- » [Home](#)
- » [Message from the Chairs](#)
- » [News & Developments](#)
- » [Ask the Experts](#)
- » [Articles](#)
- » [Case Notes](#)
- » [Newsletter](#)
- » [Program Materials](#)
- » [Online Resources](#)
- » [Committee Calendar](#)
- » [Subcommittees](#)
- » [Join this Committee](#)

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[Back to Top](#)