The State of Legal Social Networking

Posted on Saturday, July 18th, 2009 at 8:00 am.

I have been a long time fan of social networking for lawyers. Capturing the conversation among colleagues is one of the best ways of capturing knowledge and finding expertise. Connecting with peers is the best way to stay up-to-date on the law. That was one of the primary reasons that bar associations formed. Can these online networking opportunities be as effective as your local bar association? Are they worth your time?

Here is my take:

**Martindale-Hubbell Connected**
11,359 members

Currently, this appears to be the biggest social networking site focused on the legal market. So they come first in this article.

Connected is in the position of being backed by large company with significant resources and lots of substantive legal content. The site's focus has been on creating a trusted community and validating the identity of the user. This resulted in a lengthy and error prone process for joining the site. (They just revamped the process: New Registration Workflow Launches.)

There is very little substantive legal content. The lure of this platform has been the potential of harnessing the vast Lexis database of substantive legal information to the individual. So far that potential remains untapped. The downside of having a big company behind the site is the slow speed and legacy systems that hamper the development of the site.

There are not many discussions taking place in the platform. The few discussions are focused on social networking itself. They continue that trend by devoting the week of July 20 as Social Media Policy & Guidelines Week. An interesting topic, but it will be subject to the limited audience and participants in this site. The people I would look to for guidance on this topic are not users of the platform.

If you are interested in finding out more about social media policies, the discussions next week may be interesting. But there is much more information and discussion on this topic outside the platform.
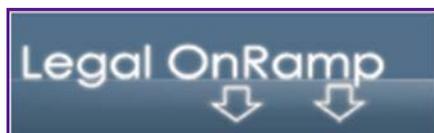
Legal OnRamp
9,242 Members

Legal OnRamp is the most innovative of these sites. It has vibrant conversations with people that I consider to be thought leaders in the business of law.

Legal OnRamp started with a focus on connecting in-house counsel with each other and giving them a platform to collaborate. Then they started allowing private practice lawyers

into the platform to help with the collaboration and sharing of information.

Certainly, I joined and contributed because the platform was full of in-house counsel. At the time I joined, I was a private practice real estate lawyer. I stood out as real estate lawyer when most of the other members were focused technology practices and at technology companies. That quickly changed as the membership base grew.

The site does have robust content on substantive legal topics. They require private practice lawyers to submit FAQs on legal topics or otherwise contribute to the content and discussion on the platform. Failing to contribute gets you kicked out of the platform.

I was feeding my old blog (*KM Space*) into the platform. Now this blog is fed into the platform. It's interesting to see more robust conversations take place inside Legal OnRamp than on the originating blog itself.

One of the mantras of Legal OnRamp is that the practice of law is changing, so you would expect lots of discussion about how the practice of law changing and how it should change. There are. I would prefer to see more conversation about substantive legal issues. The conversations are interesting. I would just prefer some different conversations.

Legal OnRamp also recently joined forces with the Corporate Executive Board to bring new resources to law department members of the General Counsel Roundtable, a program of the Corporate Executive Board.

Legally Minded
2,000 members

There is very little activity other than new users adding their profiles. This platform is sponsored by the American Bar Association so there was much hope that this site would be able to tie into the big store of information that the ABA holds. So far, that does not seem to be the case. The other thought would be to move some of the email discussion list-serv to the platform. That did not seem to happen.

That leaves the platform as a wasted opportunity by a large legal organization.

LawLink
5,000 Members

This platform claims to be the first social network for the legal community. I had not been to the site for months until the recently launched a Twitter Forum, pulling in Tweets from members. Other than this new forum, there is not much activity here. Being first does not make you the best.

LinkedIn
88,284 Lawyers

291,500 Attorneys
324,168 listed as being in Legal Services.

Obviously LinkedIn is not limited to the legal community. But there are hundreds of thousands of lawyers and legal industry professionals using the platform to stay connected. For years, LinkedIn groups were merely badges to add to your profile. Now they are robust communities with lots of discussions and news being shared.

The groups rival the size of the legal specific platforms above. For example the Patent Law Group on LinkedIn has almost 4,000 members. The limitation is the inability to collaborate and store information in the group.

Share / Save

This post is filed under: Social Networking and Web 2.0
With the Tags: LawLink, Legal OnRamp, LegallyMinded, LinkedIn, Martindale-Hubbell Connected

21 Responses to "The State of Legal Social Networking"

1. *Internet Marketing Email » Blog Archive » State of Legal Social Networking | Compliance Building*
   July 18, 2009 at 12:08 pm (Edit)

   [...] Doug Cornelius put an intriguing blog post on State of Legal Social Networking | Compliance BuildingHere's a quick excerptThe other thought would be to move some of the email discussion list-serv to the platform. That did not seem to happen. That leaves the platform as a wasted opportunity by a large legal organization. LawLink 5000 Members ... [...]

   Reply
   #1355

2. *Jason Mark Anderman*
   July 18, 2009 at 1:38 pm (Edit)

   I would agree that it would be nice to see a greater variety of conversations at Legal OnRamp. I also have noticed more substantive discussions about my blog posts within the social network than on my original blog. Sadly, they recently went through an upgrade and many past comments were apparently unintentionally lost. I do know they are trying to restore the lost comments.

   I also find it quite odd that it can be so difficult to join these sites. Is there a fear that they will be overwhelmed by non-lawyers (that should be quite unlikely)? Are paralegals and contract managers welcome (I am unclear on this, perhaps only those working in-house)? It seems like they could generate much more rapid growth and networking opportunities if they had a streamlined, easy to join interface like on Facebook. In a nation with over a million lawyers, and many paralegals and contract managers on top of that, I'm not sure 11,000 members can be considered a huge success, and probably does not represent the financial opportunity a social media company would desire. Of course, perhaps this will just be a loss leader for Reed Elsevier, whose main business is obviously in the legal research arena.

   Reply
   #1356

   o *Doug Cornelius*
     July 20, 2009 at 7:50 am (Edit)

Jason -

MH Connected keeps pitching itself as a trusted place and wanting to authenticate users. So their barrier is this process. (I had trouble getting into the platform a year ago. But the process has changed since then.) I understand that they want to avoid a bunch of non-lawyers coming into the platform asking for free legal advice.

I don't think these sites are in it solely for the number of members. Quality of content and the amount of time the members spend on the site are just as valuable.

The big problem is delivering value once you get past the registration hurdle to get them to stick around.

Reply
#1367

        Alin Wagner-Lahmy
July 20, 2009 at 9:47 am (Edit)

Doug, Jason – just a small correction: Connected IS OPEN for non-lawyers today.

Reply
#1371

3. *IT BLOG - State of Legal Social Networking | Compliance Building*
July 18, 2009 at 1:56 pm (Edit)

[...] The rest is here: State of Legal Social Networking | Compliance Building [...]

Reply
#1357

4. *Pam Gaines*
July 18, 2009 at 7:12 pm (Edit)

Jason,

I hear you. I seem to have an allergy to sites demanding homework before I can even get my foot through the door to take a look-see. Guess I'm just not that desperate to join. Fortunately, the openness found with Twitter and Facebook continues to prove its worth to me, in more ways than one.

Hubby, the non-lawyer, has a favorite expression, with which he's been hammering me for 20+ years: "You lawyers, always making things so (dang) complicated! What IS it with y'all??" Lawd, I hope he doesn't find this page! :-)

Reply
#1361

        Doug Cornelius
July 20, 2009 at 7:57 am (Edit)

Pam -

I still question the value of having a closed community over an open community or semi-closed community within an open community. That is why I included LinkedIn as part of the post.

What really catches my eye is the discussion around blog posts in Legal OnRamp. For some posts, there is a much more robust discussion and commenting in Legal OnRamp than on the blog itself.

Why? Is there value to the neutral platform? Are people more open in a closed community?

Regardless, it needs to be easier to join, get inside, and add information.

Reply
#1368

5. *richards1000 (R. Richards)*
July 18, 2009 at 11:24 pm (Edit)

State of Legal Social Networking Sites, http://bit.ly/x6jmY from @dougcornelius HT @JasonAnderman

Reply
#1461

6. *Alin Wagner-Lahmy*
July 20, 2009 at 1:33 am (Edit)

Doug – thanks for mentioning the Social Media Policy week in Connected – I am really excited about it and am very curious to see where it goes. This is a hot topic now at the industry, hence the decision of dedicating a week to it in Connected. This is the first in many special 'event-weeks' planned – stay tuned! BTW and regarding the level of discussions – I invite you to check the community again as lately there have been some great discussions starting to bubble up.

Jason – I am not sure 'success' is *just* about the numbers anymore now that social media has been 'legitimized'. Facebook has 250,000,000 users, that's a great number, but do they represent the audience you are looking to engage with? So 11,000 size is not the only factor in success – it's THE RIGHT 11,000 that are in a specific space/site that are a factor in a success of a good networking site. Just as an example, if you went to a huge conference attended by the general public, do you think you will get a more productive professional dialogue than if you went to a smaller conference that is focusing on your industry only? I am not sure. It's not JUST about the size, it's also about WHO IS there. Don't get me wrong, I strongly believe in the power and use of the mass social sites – it all depends on what your goals are, who you want to interact with, and how.

Reply
#1363

   o *Doug Cornelius*
   July 20, 2009 at 8:03 am (Edit)

   Alin -

   The problem is the classic 1-9-90 of online content. 1% are the creators, putting most of the content in place, 9% will leave comments and small bits of additional content and the remaining 90% just look and don't contribute.

   So, to be successful, you need to increase membership or increase the contribution rate. I visit MH Connected at least once a week, but there is not much contribution.

   Obviously, I think policies are very important. After all compliance is all

about creating policies, enforcing them and monitoring them.

Reply
#1369

- *Alin Wagner-Lahmy*
  July 20, 2009 at 2:51 pm (Edit)

  I do see Connected conversation starting to pick up good pace, check
  out:

  * latest forum discussions about social media marketing
  (http://community.martindale.com/forums/t/5379.aspx),
  * In house counsel survey about billable hours
  (http://community.martindale.com/forums/t/6402.aspx)
  * new great blog by Bradley Clark (http://community.martindale.com
  /pages/ViewProfile.aspx?uid=1739195)

  There is also a lot of activity that is happening in the private and
  confidential groups – where people feel secure and safe to discuss their
  matters freely. Which is an interesting topic in its own right given the
  other comments here around closed vs open communities.

  Yes, I agree, these are all new conversations. I agree, we could
  definitely enjoy more of these and put our main focus with encouraging
  engagement. If you compare these to conversations we had in
  Connected 2-3 months ago, I hope you agree there is a major
  difference in variety, pace – and existence – of conversations. Every
  community, like a plant, needs time to 'bake', and grow, and I can see
  the Connected seedling quickly coming out. Is Connected noisy of
  conversation – not quite. Is it heading there – absolutely. I, like you, am
  eager to see more activity, but a plant is a plant is a plant – I am not
  going to pull it to grow, but I am sure watering it with the right
  discussion will make it as amazing as it can be [I am getting all
  Rheingold here, I know.]

  To me these are actually the finest moments of a community – where
  people are discovering it and each other, when the core community is
  formed, a moment before it becomes a place of busy conversation, and
  2 moments before it becomes so popular that people start longing for
  the times 'when it was just us'.

  Regarding the 1% rule and the Social Media Policy week: the main goal
  is to come up with a repository of content that law firms and companies
  could use later on, that is built on community perspective, experience
  and thoughts. My hope is that as a result of this week there will be
  some buzzing conversation in the community, one that can be seen and
  read.

  Even if not, I know many people, as you have indicated, are still
  reading and following the conversation – passively involved in it.
  Unlike the real world, this impact is hard to feel and gauge, but more
  often than not, it has immense impact on the community later on. The
  contribution, the collaboration, has started – visible or not. Of course
  I'd like it to be visible – and I also deeply appreciate the less visible
  impact. Companies and Law Firms still struggle with the if's, what's
  and how's of social media policy, and if we could offer them a
  repository of reference for that – well, that would be great won't it?

Secondary purpose is to get the community itself to think about what these social media guidelines mean for us. I am hoping that discussing social media policy will also clarify rules of engagement for those still uncertain of what to say – but want to participate, those that can be converted into active users.

Reply
#1375

7. *David Hobbie*
July 20, 2009 at 9:22 am (Edit)

Doug–

I recently posted on LinkedIn's rapid growth, an important development in this space.

http://caselines.blogspot.com/2009/07/linkedin-for-lawyers-doubling-every-six.html

Though you list it last, LinkedIn is the closest to the on-line social network where not being on it is a bad career move.

I added the "legal practice" category to the "legal services" category you searched and came up with 627,000 people (last week). I agree with your numbers for self-identified "lawyers" and "attorneys."

David

Reply
#1370

○ *Doug Cornelius*
July 20, 2009 at 10:34 am (Edit)

David -

You illustrate a weakness in use of an big open platform. The people you want to join in the community are spread out and disjointed.

There are several ways for lawyers to categorize themselves. You post showed that there is no easy way to aggregate the lawyers in LinkedIn.

I was going to include Twitter, but it was even harder to get a count of lawyers from that platform. Twitter may be the place where the most discussion among legal professionals is taking place.

Reply
#1373

8. *Jason Mark Anderman*
July 20, 2009 at 10:24 am (Edit)

Alin and Doug, I think you make a fair point about the quality of the members. But, correct me if you have a different take, that seems to suggest that there is a zero sum game here, namely, you need a more closed environment to have high quality members, and if you use a more open environment, you compromise this goal. I'm just not sure that's the case, as I believe that if you give people excellent tools and successfully market yourself as the right place to go, you'll have the quality users you need. Right now the barrier to entry seems too high. It would also seem that

less than 1% of market penetration means that we're missing a great deal of good people.

In this vein, I was not surprised to discover that Legal OnRamp only had 859 unique visitors in February (though they were over 3000 last month). Perhaps this relatively small number of users compared to their overall membership reflects the lack of diversity of conversations on the site? What do you think, Doug?

I do find it intriguing that Alin noted Connected is now open to non-lawyers. All in all, MH Connected is quite new. It will be interesting to see where things stand a year from now.

Reply
#1372

     o   *Doug Cornelius*
July 20, 2009 at 10:46 am (Edit)

Jason -

Time for some theory on the network effect. As a communications platform, any of these sites will fall under Metcalfe's law: http://en.wikipedia.org /wiki/Metcalfe%27s_law. Since they are social, Reed's law may be applicable: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metcalfe%27s_law.

To sum up the theories, the more people that use the tool, the more useful it is. Membership is not the key, use is the key.

The classic example for Metcalfe's law is the fax machine. The first person with a fax machine was very bored. At the other extreme, email has become ubiquitous because it is ubiquitous. Everyone has an email address.

These platforms get more useful as more people use them. Joining is merely the first step. You actually need to use it for them to useful.

The benefit of a closed group is that you can see who else is using it and create more connections with those you know or share interest. The downside of a closed group is that there are fewer members and therefore fewer people you know or share an interest.

The conversation and content is going to come from a smaller subset of those that contribute. As you point out, that leads to a lot of navel-gazing conversations on Legal OnRamp. Same as the most popular conversations on Twitter seem to be about Twitter itself.

Reply
#1374

        ▪   *Alin Wagner-Lahmy*
July 20, 2009 at 4:06 pm (Edit)

Size matters, it matters much, but it is not the only thing that matters.

As I pointed out in my first comment, both group types and sizes can work for you – all depends on who and what you are looking for: just as an example, If you are aiming for a specific job in Microsoft, will it be more beneficial to meet all Microsoft employees or just the person participating in making the decision of hiring you?

[Reply](#)
#1377

- *Jason Mark Anderman*
  July 20, 2009 at 5:31 pm (Edit)

  Ah, but if, say, 10 people are involved in the hiring decision, would it be more useful to meet just one, or to meet at least five of them?

  That said, Alin, I really want to see where MH Connected goes over the next year. Given that it's gaining traffic much faster than the other exclusive legal sites, is under the tremendously valuable MH brand, and is backed by the ample resources of Reed Elsevier, I'm excited about its future prospects (as I'm sure you are as well).

  Doug, thanks for the Metcalfe's Law reference, I've been meaning to look it up since reading it on another blog recently.

  I was thinking about network effects earlier today when commenting on the TechCrunch article about Prezi getting VC funding (http://bit.ly/1NSLF).

  Have either of you seen Prezi? It's breakthrough presentation software that is much more impressive and visually arresting than Powerpoint. Here's a presentation I created: http://prezi.com/37972/

  I noted that the ultimate challenge for Prezi is the network effect issue. When I showed up to give this presentation at the IACCM convention in Orlando, the laptop to be used was set to go with Powerpoint, but, sadly, was not connected to the Internet, so I could not access my Prezi cloud presentation file (luckily they paid an extra fee to the hotel to go on-line). This underscores Doug's point and goes to show that the most valuable thing about Powerpoint is that it's ubiquitous.

[Reply](#)
#1378

- *Doug Cornelius*
  July 21, 2009 at 9:10 am (Edit)

  You are correct that absolute size is not the relevant measuring stick, but relative size is. It is what tool the people you want to communicate with use to communicate that is key.

  An online community is not useful if there is only one person in the community I want to share information with. It becomes much more useful if there are 10 people and many time more useful if there are 10,000. But a huge membership, with only a few people you are personally interested in, is not very useful.

  The LinkedIn group for 100,000 people is not useful if nobody in the group uses it as a communications tool.

[Reply](#)
#1382

9. *Internet Marketing Email » Blog Archive » The State of Legal Social Networking | Compliance Building*
   July 20, 2009 at 2:57 pm (Edit)

   [...] Doug Cornelius created an interesting post today on The State of Legal Social Networking | Compliance BuildingHere's a short outlineDoug Cornelius put an intriguing blog post on State of Legal Social Networking | Compliance BuildingHere's a quick excerptThe other thought would be to move some of the email discussion list-serv to the platform. … [...]

   Reply
   #1376

10. *Community – from start up, to borg; from an idea to embedded behavior « Sleepless in NY*
    July 20, 2009 at 9:47 pm (Edit)

    [...] growth? Interestingly today a very relevant discussion has developed around the topic in Doug Cornelius's Blog ComplianceBuilding: does a mass community make a successful one? do you need a community large in numbers to have a [...]

    Reply
    #1379

11. *Dave Hale*
    July 22, 2009 at 2:01 pm (Edit)

    Social networking is a key "ingredient" to a business. Although it just recently become popular from the past 5 years or so, it has definitely changed the way business run things now.

    Keep the good info coming.

    Dr. Dave Hale
    Internet Marketing Professor
    http://www.drdavehaleonline.com

    Reply
    #1393

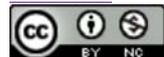**Please Leave a comment**

Logged in as Doug Cornelius. Log out »

Submit Comment

You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed.
Posts are printer friendly.

Subscribe to Compliance Building