

How Social Media Helped Jump Start My Practice

By Cari Rincker, Rincker Law, PLLC

Last June, I made a big decision to quit my job in Wyoming and relocate back to New York City to hang my shingle as an agriculture and environmental attorney. Armed only with my knowledge of reading a few books on starting a law practice, I started Rincker Law, PLLC. Social media has helped jump start my law practice in several ways. My agriculture law blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Plaxo, JD Supra, Avvo, and Justia have all played a role into getting my practice off the ground.

I'm a Legal Blogger

Part of the reason why I decided to go solo was because I wanted to become the agriculture attorney that I went to law school to be. With this in mind, I wanted to start an agriculture law blog to help showcase this love for the industry. As a new solo, I felt that the blog would be a good way for me to focus my energies towards my longterm goals. But in the short-term, it has played a role in building my practice in just a few months.

The blog itself has been incredibly successful thus far. Not only does it demonstrate my knowledge and passion for agriculture law to potential clients, but my agriculture law blog is also becoming a great information source for people in the agriculture community. Additionally, I am finding my blog linked to other agriculture blogs and this type of organic advertising is invaluable. I have been pleasantly surprised how many agriculture producers are following my blog. Blogs have a unique way of forging relationships with people that you do not know. In the last month at two different conferences, several people have come up to me saying "I follow your blog!" From there, a conversation started helping make this person part of my network.

From a technical standpoint, my web designers incorporated my blog directly into my website (www.rinckerlaw.com/blog). Even though many legal bloggers have their blogs on separate sites (*e.g.*, Blogger, Wordpress, Typepad), having your blog incorporated in your firm's website helps the blog look more professional and drives more traffic to your law firm website. If a person is googling topics that I blog about, he/she can easily find my biography and contact information on my firm's website.

In my opinion, there are three big factors that help make a blog successful. The most important factor in a successful blog is knowing your audience. I'm not blogging to other lawyers; instead, I'm blogging to farmers, ranchers, and agribusiness owners. My blog is primarily informative and written to the nonlawyer. I want farmers and ranchers to check into my blog each week for information on current events and practical legal advice that they can implement in their life. One day I might blog about how Cass Sunstein was appointed and the next I might continue my Ag Torts 101 series or discuss language that should be included in a farm lease. Blogs do not always have to be a sophisticated work of art, but they need to speak to your audience.

The second most important factor in a successful blog is to show who you are. Though I try to be professional in my blogs, I think lawyers should not be afraid to show their personality. To explain, some of my blogs have little to do with the law itself. For example, I might have a blogroll on various cattle blogs or ag tweeps to follow or discuss my involvement with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association's ("NCBA") Young Producers' Council ("YPC") or the New York State Bar Association ("NYSBA") Animal Law Committee. Show who you are as a person and why you stand out from the crowd. At the end of the day, people want to hire somebody they like and trust. Have the real you shine through in your blog.

Finally, get the word out about your blog and its entries. Other types of social media can help do this for you. For example, I bring my blog into Facebook through the Networked Blogs application. Each time my blog is updated, it shows up in the minifeed of my 1000+ closest "friends." My friends oftentimes comment on my blogs right there in Facebook instead of the blog itself. Also, I always put my blog links on Twitter so the 1000+ people following me see my blog topic and link. Some folks "retweet" my blog title and link to their followers (and so on). My blog also automatically updates in my LinkedIn and Plaxo profiles so my professional contacts can view my new entries. Justia also has my agriculture law "blawg" listed on their website. You've worked hard on building your social circles. Use these contacts to leverage the visibility and readership of your blog.

I'm a Facebooker

Admittedly, I am in the Facebook generation but Facebook is a great marketing tool for attorneys of all age groups. I was in law school when Facebook was just for people with an email from colleges or universities so most of my contemporaries are also on Facebook; however, Facebook isn't just for college kids anymore. Over the last few years, Facebook has matured and morphed into a powerful networking tool for professionals, organizations and businesses.

Facebook is more about "*who you know*" while Twitter is about "*who you want to know*." My Facebook profile a mix of both professional and personal. As I am "friending" more professional contacts, I have struggled somewhat on the proper balance. I do use Facebook to post personal pictures of my life and most of my status updates are personal in nature, but Facebook does have sophisticated privacy settings. I am able to put strictly professional contacts on my "Limited Profile" so I can restrict their access to certain photo albums and information. Some decide to have two Facebook profiles: one personal and one professional. This option seems unmanageable to me but it is the only way to really ensure professional contacts don't see personal information. Stay in your comfort zone, whatever that may be.

The important networking principle here is that Facebook is a way to get to know *people*. Old friends, new friends, friends of friends (and their friends!): it's a place where people can interact and share ideas and what is going on in their life. Part of generating clients is building relationships and Facebook is a perfect place to do that. Don't be a passive Facebooker – join the party and share your ideas, an interesting news article or post pictures. Join discussion groups relevant to your area of practice and chime into the conversation. Show your passions and who

you are as a person. When these people need a lawyer, they will think of you.

I also use Facebook to help market my law firm. I downloaded the JD Supra application so my Facebook friends can see the legal articles that I have uploaded onto the site. As noted above, I bring my agriculture law blog into Facebook through Networked Blogs. I also created a “fan page” for Rincker Law, PLLC and in only a month I have almost 400 “fans.” I keep my personal profile private while my fan page is open to the public so the articles I post on there can be found through google. A fan page can be used to generate discussion, post news about your law practice or upcoming speaking events. In addition, my blog also automatically comes into my Facebook fan page. I also think that my fan pages illustrates that I have a lot of people who know and support me.

I’m a Legal Bird

After months of resistance, I finally joined Twitter and it has had a positive impact on my career. In fact, I have generated more contacts through Twitter than the other types of social media combined. At first, I didn’t understand Twitter since I was already a Facebooker. Twitter just seemed like another place for me to post Facebook status updates, but Twitter is a completely different animal than Facebook entirely. If you are not on Twitter, I urge you to give it a second chance.

In just a few short months, I quickly caught on to the madness and I am now part of the cult called Twittersphere. After watching a tutorial on YouTube, I finally learned how to successfully use Twitter (it took me a week to understand what the “@” and “#” symbols meant). Before I knew it, I had farmers and ranchers all over the country following my tweets and replying back to me. I have had phone and email conversations with people that I have met through Twitter and have met several people In Real Life (“IRL”) through Tweet-ups and agriculture conferences. The real key here is to try to convert *virtual* relationships into *real* relationships, which takes time and persistence.

Most of the people I am friends with on Facebook I know personally; however, the charm of Twitter is that you follow and are followed by people you do not necessarily know personally. Twitter is about forging relationships with people you *want* to know. Though some people choose to tweet about every nuance of their life, Twitter is primarily about sharing ideas. This is the true value of Twitter. It is the fastest way to get and spread news today and a great way to have conversations about the issues you care about (and your clients care about). It’s amazing what you can say in 140 characters.

Another way that Twitter can help spark networking opportunities is through participation in discussion groups with your potential clients. For example, I participate in weekly discussions called #agchat (the hashtag makes the term searchable on Twitter). I join the conversation on Tuesday nights with farmers, ranchers, agriculture extension specialists, and other agriculture enthusiasts to talk about issues affecting the industry. Not only has it helped me gain notoriety within the industry, but it has also helped build relationships. There are discussion chat groups in

myriad of topics on Twitter and I think lawyers need to be part of that online conversation.

In addition, I have used Twitter as a powerful marketing tool for my firm. As I previously stated, each time I update my blog, I post a link on Twitter and oftentimes my ag tweeps “retweet” this link to their followers. This helps increase the readership of my blog and visitors to my law firm website. Also, let your relationships with your tweeps help do the marketing for you. For example, I met an ag journalist through Twitter that recently recommended me as an agriculture attorney in her article (which is the best kind of advertising that you can ever receive). On Fridays, the folks on Twitter recommend other people to follow. If I am mentioned in a #FollowFriday (or #FarmerFriday) by a farmer or rancher, their followers are more likely to follow my tweets as well allowing my network to expand while helping get my name out among the agriculture industry. Furthermore, my web designers also developed a Twitter background for me that matches my website. From a marketing standpoint, this background gives my Twitter page a more professional look and I am able to comply with New York ethics rules by ensuring the background says “Attorney Advertising.”

Twitter is also perfect for technology enthusiasts, like myself, and helps create a public image that is technology savvy. I downloaded UberTwitter to my Blackberry so I can literally tweet from the palm of my hand when I am out of the office. I enjoy tweeting from conferences from my Blackberry and being apart of that “breaking news” source for farmers and ranchers. Additionally, I have also downloaded TweetDeck to my computer which adds a completely different dimension to Twitter. I have two Twitter accounts: a personal account (@CariRincker) and a law firm account (@RinckerLaw). Tweetdeck makes managing multiple accounts a breeze. You can also selectively choose to update your Facebook status from Tweetdeck and have columns for search terms such as #ag, #farm, or #cattle. It is very easy to “retweet” (“RT”) through Tweetdeck or send people direct messages or @ replies. Additionally, JD Supra has an exciting Facebook application for Twitter called Social Transcripts. Through this application, my Facebook account brings in all the tweets with #agchat each day so my Facebook friends can quickly see the news bites affecting agriculture. Not only do I want to portray the image that I am on the cutting edge of technology but I want people to see me as a great source of information on agriculture law and policy.

From a privacy standpoint, I have decided to have my @CariRincker account private and my @RinckerLaw account public. There are different views about this. I tweet mostly about law firm news and agriculture law from my @RinckerLaw account while my @CariRincker account is a mixture of both personal and professional tweets. I prefer this so every tweet from @CariRincker cannot be googled; however, my tweets and hashtags from this account cannot be searched within Twitter so I probably don’t have as many followers as I could. Another advantage to having public accounts is the ability to participate in discussion groups like #agchat or #foodchat. Chat programs like TweetChat or Twubs cannot pick up your tweets if they are private. Because of this, most attorneys on Twitter tend to keep their account(s) completely public. This is a matter of personal preference and I reconciled it by having both a private and public account. I use my public @RinckerLaw account to participate in discussion groups and I am more selective on my tweets from this account.

I Keep My Profiles Updated and Stay Abreast of Social Media Trends

I have professional profiles listed on LinkedIn, Plaxo, Avvo, Justia, JD Supra, Martindale Hubble, and Findlaw. I realize that this list is somewhat exhausting, but I think that it's important to have updated profiles on at least a few of these websites. Each of these websites have potential advantages and ways to help generate business.

LinkedIn allows you to post your online resume and connect with other professionals. I bring my blog into LinkedIn and join relevant groups for networking purposes. I have also been very impressed with Justia so far. It's a great way to bring in all your information about your law practice onto one place with links to your "blawg," Twitter, JD Supra, Scribd, Facebook, etc. JD Supra has also be a nice place to upload legal documents and articles. I recently prepared a law outline for an animal welfare conference and uploaded the outline onto JD Supra. I also posted the link to my livestock animal cruelty outline to my agriculture law blog. Social media is at its best when the different tools are blended.

Admittedly, I have not fully tapped into my potential with Avvo. Though my profile is updated, many lawyers generate business by answering questions from potential clients through the program. Social media can be somewhat time-consuming but I should probably implement time to answer questions on Avvo into my daily routine. I am also considering starting a YouTube account for Rincker Law, PLLC where I will have videos of interesting agriculture law lectures done by myself and other attorneys in the industry. Some attorneys are video blogging right now and that is something else that I am considering. Stay abreast on social media trends but also make it your own and tailor your use to speak to potential clients.

How Has Social Media Translated Into Business?

My activity in social media has generated business for my new law practice in several ways. First, some of my clients and potential clients are using social media. Powerful networking requires planting seeds and cultivating those relationships. I have cultivated past relationships through Facebook and formed new ones through Twitter. Not only have I met clients and potential clients through social media, but I have also met other attorneys which have referred work to me. Second, social media has given me a way to demonstrate my knowledge and passion for agriculture law to my friends and the general public. We live in an internet age and clients are attracted to lawyers who are talking, writing, blogging and tweeting about the issues that are important to them. Finally, social media has given me an internet presence that showcases my credentials and highlights my personality. Social media allows attorneys to be *creatively professional* while cultivating relationships with both clients and respected colleagues. Social media can be time-consuming so choose your weapons accordingly. The ultimate goal is to strengthen your internet presence, expand your social network, and build your credibility as an attorney in your area of practice.