

From the Great Jakes Blog

What Malcolm Gladwell doesn't understand about social media (and what every law firm should know)



By Dion Algeri, Founder
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Back when we first started building websites for law firms (in 2003) it seemed that every new business meeting included at least one attorney who was a website skeptic. During each meeting there was an exchange that went something like this:

Cranky Attorney: I'm not sure why we should spend money on this website. Nobody is going to hire us because they find us on the damn internet!

Me: You're right – nobody is going to Google "bankruptcy attorney" and then hire you because you're listed there. It just doesn't happen that way. However, there are lots of studies which show that most in-house counsel will visit your website prior to taking a new business meeting with you. Don't you want to give them a positive impression of your firm?

Cranky Attorney: <Yawn>

My point about Cranky Attorney: He couldn't accept the idea that a website was simply a business development tool that would assist him in doing what he was already doing. *If it wasn't a silver bullet for landing new clients, a website had no value in his opinion.*

Nearly eight years later, this dialog is happening again with regard to social media. And to the new crop of skeptical lawyers, I encourage them to consider this: *Social media is just another tool that can help get your message out there.* It's a potentially potent tool. But it's no silver bullet.



Malcolm Gladwell

So, what about Malcolm Gladwell?

I was inspired to write this post after reading Malcolm Gladwell's recent New Yorker piece entitled "Why the revolution will not be tweeted." I normally love Gladwell's stuff. However, I found this piece to be disappointing because he uses the same weak logic as Cranky Attorney.

In the New Yorker article, Gladwell explains that big social movements (ones that require people to risk their lives) can't be effectively organized online. According to Gladwell, history shows that a movement's leadership must share strong social ties or it won't get off the ground. And since Twitter and Facebook tend to engender loose ties, Gladwell dismisses their value.

My point about Gladwell: He basically shows that social media isn't a silver bullet – and then dismisses the entire medium as useless for social movements. I find this logic to be absolutely baffling. Is there no middle ground? Can't social media have tremendous value simply as a communications tool? Social media is an instantaneous, ubiquitous, interactive and free form of communication. That's got to be worth something, right?

My conclusion: Today – in 2010 – there are few people in the legal marketing world that doubt the value of a website. Are websites a silver bullet for legal marketing? Of course not. In fact, I'd be surprised if there were any lawyers out there who would attribute their success entirely (or largely) to a website. Websites are simply tools that lawyers and firms can use to get their messages out. *And soon everybody will come to the same conclusion about social media.*

One last thing: Despite what Malcolm Gladwell says – I'm absolutely convinced that the next revolution will, in fact, be tweeted.