

Make Social Media your Top Priority for 2011

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Phew.....

.... [Y]ou can almost feel the tension being dissipated as the year comes to a (none to soon) end!!

Let's face it, you would hardly describe this year as Fun. And, no doubt, with the impending VAT rise and the full impact of the public service cuts yet to hit home, it is unlikely to get hugely better, any time soon.

If you have not yet set out your goals for 2011, either personal or as part of your firm's programme, you will be doing so early in the New Year and no doubt you will revisit some of the perennial issues like retaining clients, cross-selling and winning new clients (let's leave the slightly softer stuff like managing and coaching your people to one side for now).

But where I wonder – and yes I am deeply, deeply interested – will social media fit into your programme of events, developing collateral, MARCOMS and sweating – as in getting some return on your investment – your web site?

A huge amount has been written in 2010 about social media but it still pains me to see so few law firms failing to embrace even the most elementary of tools and methodologies.

Take the ubiquitous Plug Ins that can be found on practically all the websites that you visit - Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Email and Stumbleupon seem to be the most common although I have noticed more social bookmarking sites taking greater prominence – and ask yourself a very simple question:

“Having cajoled and nagged everyone in the firm to produce copy for your latest Bulletin or Newsletter, why on earth would you want to park that on the website and only rely upon an email campaign to syndicate the content?”

If I was being especially sarcastic (well no more so than usual) I would postulate it is because you are getting such Awesome results that you don't need to bother. "Ha, ha, ha" I hear you cry: If only that had a (big fat) grain of truth; but we all know that even the most vivid and glossy newsletter is unlikely to get more than a few percentage points of hits when measured against the value of a single instruction. In all likelihood you are not going to find someone immediately responding to a newsletter and instructing you. Even more worrying the newsletter gets washed over with that rather limp phrase: "We just want to raise our profile".

In case you have lost the thread, what I am driving at is that social media, in all its guises, offers so many more possibilities to earn attention for your firm or more particularly the people within the practice that it is a complete dereliction of duty not to engage in one form or another. I can sense (even without seeing your read the post) that some of you will be prodding a finger here or shouting at the (computer) screen there:

“Well of course Summerhayes would say that because that is his livelihood”.

Possibly but actually social media whilst a driver for growth in my business is still in its nascent stage and more firms are interested in doing the basics right and in such a way that they can exploit their firm's intellectual capital, which in common parlance means how they can get their people to engage with their current and new clients with a view to winning new work. The preoccupation if there is one is getting lawyers to think about practice development and

whilst social media might get mentioned as a throw-away line no one is quite ready to throw baby out with the bath water and ditch all their traditional paid media like Yellow Pages and newspaper advertising, much as I would like to see some of this happen (well certainly not such significant amounts spent without better or some analysis to make well informed decisions).

However, there is perhaps a more serious and fundamentally flawed rationale to this: The more time they spend on the traditional stuff and the less on new media, the greater the risk that some of the new entrants in 2011 (I refuse to use the 'T[*^*&] law' words....) will steal a space that could belong to you or your firm. The issue that worries me about this is that as larger brands start to apply their technologically, consumer focused approach they will squeeze the market even further as they start to invest time in creating content that is then distributed to their huge client base and those clients will feel that as you are not reaching out to them in the same way that you can't actually be doing this stuff. Can you imagine going to YouTube and watching a very smooth production as part of a push to generate interest around a fixed fee legal product or some breaking news and how it can be applied in your business or life. At the moment a great deal of the social media engagement bears this out as there are not enough large firms who are producing or even facilitating the use of new media and the platforms which are largely free.

It would be conjecture, to a degree, as to why so few firms have engaged but I would wager it is a combination of ignorance and/or fear. If it were otherwise why are there not more people from main-stream firms on Twitter or producing material on a blog?

I will be coming back to this theme again (and possibly again) but firms need to move social media up the agenda so that practically every meeting starts off with a discussion about how a social media model can leverage the firm's brand, creative intellectual capital and collateral that the firm continues to churn out.

Still stuck? Well here are a few ideas to get you started on this road:

1. Work out what material you are already producing that could be cross-pollinated into a social media presence.
 - 1A. Get a share button installed on every page of your website.
2. Work out who your ambassadors are for the development of social media and empower them to leverage their ideas.
3. If you must, make sure that you have a common sense social media policy in place but don't just write it in isolation to your social media ambassadors. Get their take on it. Does it suck or fly? If it is too prescriptive then it is likely to be self-defeating as people will simply give up if it looks like too much hassle and the post or Tweet has to go through too many pairs of eyes before it gets sign off.
4. Put some numbers together. It can't be measured it won't exist for long. Don't though start obsessing about Re-Tweets and Likes but try to look initially at things like the sentiment of the comments and after that you need to think how you might give away content to earn greater attention. Although you may still need some persuading that it is not another pipe to shove your sales message down if you must use it exclusively in that way then for goodness sake spend some time thinking about the content and material. If it doesn't have ****star**** quality then you are going to fade out of mind fairly quickly as people decide to unplug you from their stream.

5. Make sure that you get people involved who are passionate about their subject area. Even if they are quite difficult to engage with, in my experience it is far easier to get something that has depth and meaning from someone who is writing from the heart and not the head message which is bound up with how many words do I have to write.

6. Make sure like exercise that you do it regularly. No stop, start either. If you feel that you are going to struggle on this point then think carefully about the people you have invited into your social media tent.

7. Start reading outside of your chosen legal area. Be interesting and think about the issues that your clients are facing. As a for instance, let's say you practice employment law. Do you think the client will be interested in reading the latest case report? No. What they want is some analysis about their sector or better still their business and what they could be doing to make it more efficient, avoid trouble in the future and militate against getting a large legal bill.

8. Get comfortable with share and like buttons and pointing your clients in the direction of these buttons. If you think it would be helpful to explain the use and or need to your clients don't think that that gives you a cop out to not bother. Your clients may be in a similar position to you but with a gentle education exercise the likelihood is that they will get it and who knows they may just start passing the information on which is one of the reasons for entering this space.

9. Don't put this off to another day. If the moment grabs you or more likely has already grabbed you then for heaven's sake do something now.

In conclusion, you will have many pressing issues to attend to in 2011 and in many respects social media may seem like a distraction but don't simply focus from your standpoint and remember that more and more clients will expect to engage and more particularly find their lawyer on line and social media is the perfect way to increase your chances of being found. Even if it may be difficult to predict the ROI, that is no reason to leave alone and you should be laying out your 10 point plan for social media if you have not already done so.

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