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Social Networking Spurs Firms To Log On Or Lose Out

By **Liz McKenzie**

Law360, New York (March 25, 2009) -- With many law firms pushing attorneys to take advantage of social networking sites' potential to increase business contacts, legal industry experts say that firms that don't log on might be left in the dust.

And the business development potential made possible by the millions of users of social networking sites isn't the only reason more firms are logging on. According to Pamela Woldow, a principal at legal consulting firm Altman Weil Inc., firms that fail to capitalize on social networking may appear more 'behind the times' than those that choose to use it to their benefit.

"If a law firm doesn't have an online presence beyond its Web site, it will be at a disadvantage," Woldow said. "It makes a law firm look out of sync because the rest of the business world is online. They just won't be noticed."

Law firms have been slow to embrace social networking in the past, but the economic downturn is now causing many firms to give those Web sites a second look, according to Woldow.

"We're entering a time where many lawyers are being laid off and firms are barely surviving," she said. "The people remaining in the practice of law have to differentiate themselves from the other firms that are hungry for business."

However, the array of social networking opportunities — which includes mainstream networks such as Facebook and Plaxo and more legalcentric Web sites such as JD Supra, LawLink and Legal OnRamp — can make it difficult to determine which sites are appropriate to use for developing business.

Karin Duncker, a business development director at Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky and Popeo PC, recently spearheaded a firmwide initiative encouraging its lawyers to use LinkedIn to market themselves.

LinkedIn — by far the most popular business networking site, with more than 36 million members worldwide — attracts a large number of lawyers. It allows users to create profiles detailing their business experience and to link to other members to cultivate business contacts.

"It's the same benefits you'd get through networking through industry associations and trade groups," Duncker said.

Russell Lawson, marketing director at Sands Anderson Marks & Miller PC, has spent considerable time looking into the business development potential of social networks and has encouraged members of his firm to join LinkedIn.

Lawson, who set up a “test group” of 14 attorneys engaged with LinkedIn, encouraged attorneys to join the network both as part of search engine optimization — LinkedIn profiles often rank high in search engine results — and to develop potential business connections, he said.

“Law is based on referrals,” he said. “You can’t drive people to you; you have to invite them.”

Phillip Wilson, vice president and general counsel for LRI Management Services Inc., a labor relations consulting firm, said his presence on LinkedIn had already opened the doors for business opportunities that he would not have had were he not on the site.

“I’ve probably received a couple of calls from people who want to do work that I was connected to on LinkedIn that I may not have talked with if we hadn’t been connected on [the Web site],” Wilson said.

“Being active on LinkedIn will help you professionally, whether that translates to a new client or an invitation to give a talk or other marketing activities,” he said.

To familiarize attorneys with LinkedIn, and social networks in general, Mintz Levin broadcast a video conference to its employees detailing how to best use the site and suggesting policies for how attorneys and staff should use social networks in conjunction with the firm.

Attorneys at the firm were advised to think twice about anything they post online, as most content posted on social networks is ushered into the public domain and may appear in search engine results.

“This is your outward facing impression on the world, so consider that when you create what you’re highlighting about yourself,” Duncker said. “Assume just like anything else that anything you write down as your profile could be cut and pasted and put on the front page of the New York Times.”

For now, Duncker is recommending that attorneys at Mintz Levin only use LinkedIn and has cautioned against using personal sites such as Facebook for business purposes.

“It is a great way to communicate, but Facebook is very much a party atmosphere, and I would caution anyone in a personal service provider industry to use Facebook as a means to conduct business,” she said. “It’s not really the best professional atmosphere.”

However, Altman Weil consultant Woldow recommends that firms choose two to three networks, selecting one each from legal-oriented networks, general social networks and business-oriented networks.

“There are firms that have decided to choose one or two and they tell their lawyers to make a huge presence on those networks and that has been hugely effective,” Woldow said.

An increasing number of firms and individual attorneys have also latched on to Twitter, which allows users to send brief text updates, known as tweets, to other users instantly.

“There are an awful lot of lawyers and legal consultants on Twitter,” Woldow said. “It has an enormous following, and I think it is a potentially useful method for getting your name in front of a host of other people.”

Kean Miller Hawthorne D’Armond McCowan & Jarman LLP partner Erich Rapp has more than 800 followers on Twitter and claims his efforts have already led to potential business connections.

“There are a lot of lawyers that interact with each other on that platform,” he said. “Inevitably in the practice of law, it comes down to referrals. I don’t know that I’ve gotten a new client, but I feel that I’ve created some connections that will probably lead there.”

While Twitter enables attorneys to send out legal news or links to relevant information to clients and business contacts in seconds, some feel that the service also runs the risk of making off-tweeting individuals appear as though they are focusing less on work.

"If I was a client and was looking at Twitter, I would be a little concerned if I was seeing my attorney updating their status all the time," Duncker said. "I'd wonder what I was paying them for."

Wilson typically sends about 2 to 3 Twitter updates a week, but he has also questioned attorneys that continually post updates online, he said.

"There are a lot of people I know that tweet at least 10 times a day, and the thought crosses my mind and I wonder, 'Don't they have a day job?'" he said.

JD Supra founder Aviva Cuyler, a former lawyer, created the legal-oriented social networking site so that lawyers could post documents and articles to their online profiles both at JDSupra.com and other networking sites.

"I spent 12 years as a business litigator and saw that the work that lawyers do, whether it's articles or forms, have incredible value, and there really wasn't a place for lawyers to share that and get credit for it," Cuyler said.

The site now has applications that allow attorneys to post legal documents on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Justia.com, allowing attorneys to reach a much broader audience.

"By putting them on a site that aggregates this content, [their content] ranks much higher than if it was lost on a individual site," Cuyler said. "When people put their content on the site, it also streams out to many areas to reach targeted audiences."

"JD Supra helps people connect with clients as well as colleagues and potential referrals where people discover they are working on similar issues," she said.

However some have expressed concerns that industry-specific networks lessen the pool of potential contacts.

"Specialization is great, but the point of this is to create a large, broad network," Duncker said.

Attorneys may also be resistant to the challenge of learning more intricate legal industry networks, Lawson said.

"Places like Legal OnRamp do have a learning curve," Lawson said. "It's a different interface from LinkedIn, and these don't have much more to offer than findability."

However, before encouraging attorneys to market themselves online, firms are advised to tweak their written policies to include what is acceptable for attorneys to say and do on social networks.

"It makes sense for law firms to review with their lawyers all of the proper ways of communicating, whether it's by telephone, cell phone, e-mail, social networks," she said. "They need to renew those reminders of how you report yourself in public. Social networking is no different."

"Your employees are going to be using this regardless," Duncker said. "You want to encourage them to use the tools and tech at their fingertips. It's just cautious and smart to draft a standard operating procedure on how it should be used."

In addition, social networking Web sites should not be viewed as a substitute for traditional networking and in-person communication, Woldow said.

“There may be a tendency to use social networks, when other kinds of communication would be better for building relationships,” she said. “But there is no substitute for picking up the phone or making an appointment to have lunch with someone.”

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