Getting Blogs on Your Side

by John Hellerman

In the March edition of *Strategies*, an article entitled "When Blogs Attack – Your Firm, That Is" [p. 4], discussed the downside of blogs and their tendency to be less conventional sources of news. However, as the article points out, ignoring blogs won't make them go away.

In fact, the legal community is actively engaged in the ever-expanding blogosphere. With more than 1,000 legal blogs on the Web, firms and attorneys are beginning to recognize the value of blogs as unique marketing and business development tools. Whether embracing the already-established blogosphere or creating your own blog, blogs can be useful components in a firm's communication plan.

The first step is identifying the most influential and respected blogs in your desired market. The best way to do this is by using specialty search engines such as Technorati (www.technorati.com) and Google (http://blogsearch.google.com). By using key words to search, you will undoubtedly find hundreds, if not thousands, of blogs. However, it is important to spend an appropriate amount of time visiting these blogs and weeding out those that you deem less credible. Asking the right questions as you review a blog makes it fairly easy to tell a legitimate one from a waste of time. For instance, does it have a high Technorati ranking? Do lots of other blogs link to it? Is it carrying legitimate advertising? Is it updated regularly? Is it interactive and, if so, are there a lot of comments posted? Are the comments thoughtful or wacky? Did it or its editors receive any media attention?

Another terrific way to identify legitimate and relevant blogs for a campaign is to identify one and then review its "Blogroll" (typically a list found on the side of the page of similar subject-matter blogs that are favorites of the current blog's editor). It's a safe bet to assume that if you like the style and content of a particular blog, you will also appreciate the blogs that particular author depends on for news. Put another way, someone invested enough to blog regularly about, for instance, the marketing of off-label generic pharmaceuticals will likely be a good referral source to evaluate similar blogs.

Maintaining Buzz

While bloggers aim to break news and get the inside scoop in order to demonstrate their blogs are current and active, they're often very happy to circulate (and comment on) already reported news.

In recent years, Cornerstone Research, a consulting and expert witness firm, has relied heavily on this tendency of the blogosphere to maintain buzz about a bi-annual "Securities Class Action Survey" it publishes in conjunction with Stanford Law School. The survey provides detailed information relating to the prosecution, defense and settlement of federal class-action securities fraud litigation and is released twice a year in January and July. While regular news and trade publications such as "The Wall Street Journal," "New York Times" and Bloomberg devote a substantial amount of coverage to the report, the survey really gets its "legs" on blogs. Blogs create multiple links back to the data on both Stanford and Cornerstone's Web sites and rip it apart with their own analysis and commentary, thus creating multiple interactive discussions about the research findings.

To facilitate this sort of mutually beneficial interaction, it is important to give bloggers the information they need in the proper format. Offering sources to interview is rarely helpful–bloggers want to provide their own commentary. However, because they rely so heavily on hyperlinking, providing bloggers with primary materials (Web sites, memos, etc.) will almost always lead to coverage.

Every blog–from the most trafficked to the most obscure–looks for ways to "fill the news hole." It's how they keep their readers coming back. Knowing this proved advantageous for consulting and expert witness firm Analysis Group, which recently released a highly technical report on generic pharmaceutical drugs.

The story was much too complex for a national general media campaign, and there was concern that even trade journals would consider the report too narrowly focused for their broad audience of pharmaceutical executives. Rather than let the story go untold, Analysis Group leveraged the blogosphere to achieve significant results. The firm was able to identify a handful of pharmaceutical blogs geared specifically to the esoteric focus of its report and it shared their findings with them, including making a copy of the report available for downloading off its Web site. As a result, the report received feature coverage on more than a half-dozen of the most respected blogs in the sector and, given the demonstrable grass-roots interest from the community, was eventually picked up by "The Pink Sheet," a major industry trade for the prescription pharmaceutical industry, and one of Analysis Group's priority media targets.

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Join the Party

A more ambitious way to get blogs on your side is to join the party and launch your own. Developing a well-respected, often-visited blog is not easy, but if done properly it will position your firm as a respected voice in any given industry. For a blog to become popular, though, it must distinguish itself from the diluted market through creativity, consistency and a strategic media plan.

A well regarded example is "That's What She Said" (www.hrheroblogs.com), a blog produced by Ford & Harrison LLP, a national labor and employment law firm, which uses NBC's hit comedy "The Office" as a backdrop to communicate with current and prospective clients about the difficult and complex legal issues facing employers in today's workplace.

As most know, the show takes place at a branch office of fictional paper company Dunder Mifflin, an office setting that could easily represent any in America. The show focuses on the politically incorrect behavior of the office manager Michael Scott and his employees, all of whom are involved in storylines that reflect everyday HR issues (e.g., inter-office relationships, inappropriate comments, personnel conflicts, etc.). As far as Ford & Harrison was concerned, the show was a weekly visual demonstration of what not to do for HR managers and executives.

In order to keep reader's engaged, Ford & Harrison uses a consistent format and creative hook: Julie Elgar, the attorney responsible for the blog, assigns a litigation value to each episode. The number is a dollar estimate of how much the outlandish behavior of Dunder Mifflin employees would cost real-life companies to defend in employment lawsuits. The litigation value appraisal is consistent throughout Elgar's posts and attracts people to come back each Friday to see how much financial damage Michel caused on the previous night's show.

The blogging community is close-knit and relies heavily on networking and cross-promotion. Other blogs, therefore, were among the first to recognize and embrace That's What She Said. As buzz in the blog community grew, it piqued the attention of the national and trade media, leading to placements in various national publications and now, regular calls from reporters seeking Ford & Harrison's comments on a variety of labor and employment issues.

Another, albeit very different, example of a successful law firm blog is Sutherland Asbill & Brennan's Liquefied Natural Gas blog (www.lnglawblog.com). In an effort to cement its reputation as a leading LNG practice, the firm developed a blog that has become the go-to source on LNG news. The blog links to industry news from top trade publications and news services. Because it was one of the first (if not the first) blogs to focus solely on the LNG market, journalists and editors from industry-leading trade publications are regular visitors and often call upon Sutherland attorneys for interviews and guest publishing opportunities.

Because they present unique communications tools for attorneys and firms, blogs will undoubtedly continue to grow in number and popularity. Legal marketers need to embrace the blogosphere by urging attorneys to blog themselves and by including blogs in the media plan. While some may argue that the majority of individual blogs fail to generate a great deal of traffic and are therefore irrelevant, it is safe to assume that the interested readers of a blog can be some of the most influential people in a particular sector and should, therefore, never be ignored. ■

— Maggie Schmerin contributed to this article.

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Chapter News

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our expense and program payment tracking systems. The much-clearer picture of the Chapter's fiscal position has enabled us to focus on the reinvestment of funds into educational content for the membership.

Raising the Bar

We have been talking to other Chapters and legal marketing colleagues about working with local bar associations. We hope to determine possible opportunities for the Chapter to write a regular marketing column in one of our regional bar publications.

The underlying theme among the LMA Seattle Chapter Board has been to provide and demonstrate value for our membership, and we are proud of the great strides we have undertaken to do that. Thanks for all the hard work of our terrific board members and the ongoing support of our loyal sponsors! ■

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