

Legal Experts Doubt Twitter's Ability To Bring In Cash

By Anne Urda

Law360, New York (September 25, 2009) -- With everybody seeming to jump on the Twitter bandwagon these days, law firms may be tempted to join in, but some legal experts remain skeptical of how effective a marketing tool the micromessaging service is for firms.

Twitter has been around since 2006, but the site has exploded in the past year. As law firms struggle with how to keep up with the times and bring in new clients, the system offers a modern way to connect, but legal experts have their doubts as to whether it will actually yield results.

"My feeling is that Twitter is not the ideal marketing tool for law firms," said Brian Manoff, a senior recruiter with Pittleman & Associates. "Twitter provides its audience with a variety of short, unedited, 'stream of consciousness' declarations mostly of little value and staying power."

While Twitter does provide the reader with instant gratification, it also promotes a short attention span, and it becomes difficult to make a compelling case for anything when you have only 140 characters to do it, Manoff said.

"Firms work hard to build their reputations on years of sustained success, carefully researched advice, and appropriate and effective counsel," he said. "It seems impossible to effectively convey the sincerity and depth of these principles (and in turn generate business) in a forum where the reader is accustomed to simply letting the information pass in one ear and out the other."

Part of the problem is due to the individual nature of Twitter, according to Pamela Woldow, a principal at consulting firm Altman Weil Inc.

"Twitter is so highly individual that it almost has to be individual lawyers using Twitter to create relationships that will be effective," she said. "It's not like other social media where you can just push information out."

There is no law firm on the whole that is on Twitter right now that is using it to their full advantage, with many making the classic "data dump" mistake, Woldow said.

"You see a firm that is pushing out who was quoted in an article today or linking to their Web site, and they are like a car salesman," she said. "That just becomes background noise on Twitter. Most people have hundreds of people that they follow and you just don't focus on the ones that are giving out generic information."

For a firm to use Twitter effectively, it needs to move away from the chest-beating and approach Twitter like any other relationship-building tool, she said.

"They have to make the commitment to provide information that is really useful to their readers and not just talk about how great the firm is," she said. "If they actually say, here's the target audience and we are going to provide information and communicate, that could be a good marketing tool."

But not everyone is as skeptical of Twitter's potential for professionals, with Charles Green, the founder and CEO of Trusted Advisors Associates LLC, admitting he is a recent convert to the site.

"Count me as one saying Twitter is really effective," he said. "People are going to be missing the boat soon if they are not involved."

Green acknowledges that some Twitter posts can be frivolous, but maintains that more and more businesspeople are using it and law firms should be no different.

"Twitter isn't as dumb as it sounds," he said. "An awful lot of people in the business world use it as a miniblog. This is the new brochure, this is the new article in the AmLaw Daily."

Twitter can enhance a law firm's brand image and communicate important information but only if used correctly, Green said.

"You have to have a personality," he said. "You want a lawyer not a law firm PR person writing it because you have to have a little pizzazz. There are a number of young associates who I am sure would be itching to do this."

Yet, firms need to be careful if they decide to turn individual attorneys loose on Twitter, Woldow said.

"Law firms need to establish a clear policy of what's acceptable to place in the public media," she said. "They need to remind lawyers that they should not be talking about current matters or current clients, and they should not be providing any kind of legal advice at all. You might accidentally create a client relationship you don't want to create."

But if the firm is going to allow lawyers to be on Twitter, Green maintains that it's important to give them a little breathing room.

"The purpose is to entertain and educate," he said. "It enhances your brand image if you are seen as a law firm that hires people with a personality or a sense of humor."

While firms may be leery of the new frontier, Green insists that Twitter is part of the same advertising game that firms have always known with slightly different packaging.

"Twitter is a concentrated river of information," he said. "This is not that different from a fourth- or fifth-year trying to get an article published or going to get a Continuing Legal Education credit. This is a New York Times op-ed times 1 million."

But Vickie Spang, the chief marketing officer at Sheppard Mullin Richter & Hampton LLP, still has her doubts about Twitter.

"We have thought about Twitter, but I still don't see how firms can use it to their benefit," she said.

"Twitter was not the first place for us to go."

Instead, Sheppard Mullin has focused its energies on cultivating industry-specific blogs, with the firm recently launching its 18th on so-called clean technology, according to Spang.

"We are big blog believers, and we have gotten great results," she said. "We have gotten business from some of these blogs; they are a primary resource to increase visibility and position ourselves as experts on the relevant subject area."

But Green maintains that Twitter and blogs are not mutually exclusive, especially since Twitter can help raise a blog's profile by directing readers to the relevant parts.

"One of the best things about Twitter is that it is a fast way to get people to go to blogs," he said. "If you don't have time to read blogs, Twitter gives you directions. Twitter is to blogs what blogs are to books."

Ultimately, though, for Twitter to really work for law firms they need to be able to shift the relationship out of the digital world and into real life, Woldow said.

"There needs to be an evolution and a purpose, which is to create clients," she said. "Law firms need to have an approach that moves people from being followers to being clients."