

Special Report: Attorney Blogging: Best Practices

By: Joshua Fruchter, Esq. *Joshua Fruchter, a former attorney, is president and co-founder of eLawMarketing, a leading provider of blog design and other online marketing services to law firms. He can be contacted at 866.833.6245 or at josh@elawmarketing.com. His firm's Web site is at www.elawmarketing.com.*

There is no question that blogging has become a “hot” trend among lawyers. In an October 7, 2005 article entitled “*Opening Arguments, Endlessly*,” the New York Times noted that though lawyers constitute only 1 percent of the population, a recent survey of 17,000 bloggers by a leading blog ad network found that 6.1% of bloggers are lawyers. Similarly, in December 2005, the Litigation Section of the American Bar Association asked its members for their take on the blogging phenomenon. The response: 57% of respondents read at least one blog on a regular basis, while 19% are already publishing their own blog (note: the number of respondents to the ABA survey was not revealed). With Technorati, the leading blog tracking service, now reporting over 50 million blogs (and 175,000 new blogs being created each day), the number of lawyer bloggers has surely dramatically increased since those initial surveys were taken.



Lawyers start blogging for a number of reasons. Some lawyers feel strongly about particular issues, and a blog offers them a virtual “soapbox” to share their opinions with the world. In certain instances, a well-written and popular law blog can influence public discourse about particular legal, social or political issues. But as with other marketing initiatives, blogs are most frequently viewed by lawyers as a business development tool. This motivation is evident from articles about lawyer blogging, which all – without fail -- share stories about lawyers whose practices received a major revenue boost as a result of inquiries from new clients who had been readers of their blogs. Indeed, why else would so many attorneys devote so much time and effort to researching and writing regular blog posts if not for the expectation that their expertise will become more widely known to prospective clients?

To be sure, the expectation of lawyer-bloggers about the marketing potential of blogs is not off the mark. Blogs *are* an excellent business development tool because they deliver exactly what search engines want: targeted content updated on a frequent basis and featuring lots of inbound links from related sites.

However, obtaining a high search engine ranking may no longer be enough to realize the business potential of a blog. The reason is that as the number of lawyer blogs continues to rise, differences in quality between blogs covering the same topic will become evident. There are only so many blogs that prospective clients can read on a daily basis, and as the number of choices proliferates, readers will become more selective about which lawyer blogs they track. It is therefore critical for any lawyer launching a blog to consider “best practices” that will distinguish his or her blog from those of competitors.

Design

As any lawyer well-versed in marketing will tell you, prospective clients often draw inferences about service quality from physical cues such as the appearance of a lawyer's office or the quality of his stationary. A lawyer's blog should be no different. A blog that employs a visually appealing design will project a professional image, whereas a poorly designed blog based on a stock template will send the opposite signal about the author's experience and expertise. Indeed, since a blog is nothing more than a specialized type of website, just as a lawyer should think carefully about the appearance and usability of his or her firm's website, the same care and thought should be invested in the design of a blog.

Content

While an appealing blog design will draw visitors, the quality of a blog's content will ultimately determine whether visitors convert into loyal readers. Unfortunately, many lawyers who could otherwise produce quality content remain misinformed about the frequency and quantity of blog entries (called "posts") that are required to publish a respectable blog.

The most common excuse this author has heard for not starting a blog is "I don't have the time to write so much." One misconception underlying this excuse is that writing a blog post is akin to writing a lengthy magazine article or novella. The opposite is true. As long as a post is well-written and offers a nugget or two of wisdom and insight, a few paragraphs are adequate.

Of course, the key to high search engine rankings is frequent posting, and many lawyers feel they don't have the time to write several posts a week even if it is only a few paragraphs. The issue here is that many lawyers believe that they have to create original content for each new post. On the contrary, many blogs simply analyze content created by third parties.

I like to call this the "two cents" rule of blogging. For example, the Wall Street Journal may report on a new decision handed down in a long running patent litigation involving major corporations. An IP attorney with a patent blog could simply link to the article and then add his or her own "two cents" about the legal implications of the decision for similarly situated parties. Alternatively, a local TV station website might report that some prominent individual was indicted for embezzlement. A criminal law attorney could link to the article and add his or her own "two cents" about the legal issues involved in the upcoming trial.

In short, lawyer blogs can demonstrate expertise simply by adding insight and commentary to content produced by third parties. In this vein, lawyers looking for content on which to comment should consider these strategies:

1. **Google Alerts:** provide Google with an email address and they will send you links to any and all news articles published anywhere in the world that contain the keywords or keyphrases that you identify (e.g., "embezzlement"). These news alerts can provide ample fodder for blog commentary.

2. **Westlaw/Lexis:** Westlaw or Lexis will provide alerts to subscribers about breaking decisions in a particular area of expertise. FindLaw is also a good source of notifications about new decisions tied to specific practice areas.
3. **Other Blogs:** A lawyer blogger should follow the postings of other lawyers with blogs on similar topics. If a lawyer sees an interesting and relevant post on another blog, then he or she can link to it and comment. The other lawyer will appreciate the link (since links build search engine popularity) and will undoubtedly reciprocate in the future.
4. **Government Sites:** practicing law often involves dealing with government, and many government sites offer updates on new regulations, policies, developments, etc. For example, a criminal attorney with a blog can check in on press releases posted on the websites of District Attorney and Attorney General offices on recent arrests, indictments, and verdicts.

In sum, blog content is more about publicizing your own analysis than about writing your own treatise.

Building Links

As noted, “inbound” links to your blog from other websites with related content will help increase your search engine ranking. This is because search engines view a link to your blog from a related site as a “vote of confidence” in the quality of your blog.

One strategy already mentioned for obtaining inbound links is to link to the posts of lawyers publishing blogs on related topics. You can also add other blogs to your “blogroll,” which is a list of links to your favorite blogs (usually positioned as a sidebar). If you ask, the publishers of blogs featured in your blogroll will generally reciprocate by adding your blog to their blogroll.

There is also a less well-known method to obtain a link from other blogs to your own without asking for reciprocity. The technique is based on a technology called “trackback,” which is a method of notifying another blog that you have linked to one of their posts (we’ll skip further technical explanation for now). If the other blog has “trackbacks” turned on, then once you link to one of their posts and notify them of same via a “trackback,” the other blog will automatically add a link back to the post on your blog where their post is mentioned. As long as the practice is not abused, using “trackbacks” is a nifty way to build inbound links from other blogs that also employ the technology.

Audience

As is well known, the Internet is a “viral” medium whereby content that you publish can experience geometric distribution as each interested reader passes along a link to your content to friends and colleagues.

The best way to take advantage of this reality for purposes of promoting your blog is to broaden the audience for your blog content as widely as possible. This means giving readers as many options as possible for subscribing to your latest blog posts, including subscriptions by email or

RSS (for the uninitiated, “RSS” is a technology that allows subscribers to an RSS “feed” to get notified about new posts to a blog without actually having to visit the blog). It also means liberally linking from your email newsletter and your website to your blog.

Finally, when publicizing an RSS feed for a blog, a best practice is to register the feed with FeedBurner. FeedBurner is a special service that substitutes your standard RSS feed URL with a special Feedburner URL that allows you to track aggregate download activity for your feed. But there are other benefits as well, including a feature that will “ping”, or notify, a group of popular blog directories and search engines every time you add a new post. These directories and engines, in turn, will index your posts as they are published. FeedBurner URL’s will also be separately indexed by the search engines, thus maximizing your opportunities for higher rankings.

Other techniques for expanding distribution of blog content including recording podcasts and publishing them to iTunes, or adding tags to your posts to Technorati, the leading blog tracking service.

Conclusion

As lawyer blogs, or “blawgs,” proliferate, lawyer bloggers need to maintain a competitive edge by employing the best practices mentioned in this article. In this way, they will maximize the return on their investment of time and money in their blogs.