

The Case for Social Media for Women Lawyers

Social media plays to women's rainmaking strengths...so why aren't more women playing with it?

by Carolyn Elefant, Nicole Black

Although women now graduate from law school in the same numbers as men, they remain underrepresented in the ranks of law firm leadership, lag in compensation and often lack the same opportunities for mentorship and business development training. This bleak state of affairs is borne out by the National Association of Women Lawyers' (NAWL) Fourth Annual Report, released in October 2009, which found that women lawyers account for fewer than 16 percent of equity partners at the nation's top 200 law firms and are completely absent from the governing committees at 14 percent of these firms. Even more troubling, the Report noted that women lawyers do not play a dominant role in law firm rainmaking activities – there were no women among the top ten rainmakers at 46% of the firms surveyed, while 32 % of the firms had only one – which limits their prospects for increased compensation and leadership roles.

To their credit, law firms have started to invest in flex-time programs and women's leadership initiatives, though the recent economic decline has curtailed many of these efforts before they've had a

chance to produce real results. Despite these hurdles, we remain optimistic about women lawyers' future opportunities for advancement within the legal profession largely because of the power of social media.

I. What is social media?

Before we make the case for why social media offers so much promise for women lawyers, we'll briefly explain what social media is – because the term encompasses more than most lawyers realize.

Basically, social media is a catch-all term for the various platforms and tools that integrate technology and social interaction and support user-generated content. Blogging, which has been around for close to a decade, represents one of the first iterations of social media since it supports self-publishing and feedback in the form of user comments. Today, with around 400 million active users, Facebook, with features like profile pages, photo-tagging and messaging is perhaps one of the most familiar social media platforms. But directory sites like Linked-In and Avvo also count as social media, because they enable users to create profiles, upload articles and seek testimonials from clients and colleagues. So too do document-archiving sites like Scribd and DocStoc, where lawyers can upload documents, receive comments and circulate content. JD Supra, a legal-only document site, recently added a feature

that lets users publish their content directly to their Linked-In profiles, so that prospective counsel checking out a lawyer's resume can simultaneously link to samples of their written work at JD Supra.

II. Why does social media work so well for women lawyers?

In contrast to virtually any other marketing tool, social media caters to women lawyers' unique talents and circumstances. Studies show that male lawyers are more assertive than women about tooting their own horn and asking clients directly for business. Social media, however, levels the playing field by providing platforms such as blogging or document archiving sites like JD Supra where women lawyers can demonstrate their substantive knowledge without having to brazenly promote themselves. On the flip side, studies also show that women's strength lies in building relationships, communicating and collaborating – traits that social media both facilitate and reward.

Social media also compensates for marketing opportunities that many women miss out on during child-rearing years at a firm. After all, flextime schedules leave women little time for the kinds of activities that firms have traditionally used to drum up business – such as weekend golf games, out of town conferences, after-hours meals or drinks with

prospects. As a replacement for these networking events, social media is a godsend: it doesn't take much time or even focus for a home-bound lawyer-mom to write a blog post or mine Linked-In for potential business contacts and opportunities. Moreover, because most social-media platforms are mobile, women lawyers can keep up with blog reading or Twitter while waiting online at the grocery store or in the carpool lane.

Finally, social media solves a problem unique to younger women lawyers: the paucity of female mentors and role models within law firms. Social media enables younger female lawyers to expand their immediate circle of contacts and initiate online mentoring and business relationships with women lawyers at other firms, as well as successful professional women all over the world. With appropriate nurturing, these online contacts can translate into offline business opportunities and personal friendships.

III. Does Social Media Work for Corporate Clients?

We believe that women lawyers stand to benefit most from social media by striking now, at a time when corporate clients are embracing

social media but large firms are lagging behind. Recent studies show that corporate clients are using social media for professional reasons such as accessing news relevant to their business, keeping in touch with colleagues and hiring outside counsel. According to Pew Internet and American Life Report (2009), 21 percent of Fortune 1000 senior executives read business related blogs at least once a week. In fact, a recent study by ALM Legal Intelligence Group and the Zeugheiser Group found that 27% of in-house lawyers used blogs posted by lawyers on relevant topics as the “most important” tool in researching for outside counsel for a particular engagement.

Yet, blogs are hardly the sole social media tool with the potential to attract corporate clients. The ALM/Zehugheiser report also discovered that half of in-house counsel have used Facebook for professional reasons in the past week, 51 percent of in-house counsel would read content from new media platforms if relevant to their business and 26 percent view Twitter as one of their go-to sources for news.

Even as corporate clients embrace social media, CorporateResource.com reports that law firms lag (<http://mycorporateresource.com/content/view/35128/548/>) in their

use. A huge opportunity exists for enterprising and innovative women lawyers to fill the void.

IV. Types of Social Media Tools

As we emphasize in our book, *Social Media for Lawyer: the Next Frontier* (ABA 2010), social media can devolve into a time-sink unless lawyers set specific professional goals (*e.g.*, generating clients, gaining media exposure, finding mentors) and identify social media tools to accomplish these goals. A goal oriented approach also helps time-pressed women lawyers extract the most value out of social media. Thus, for starters, rather than registering for dozens of sites, and then allowing profiles to lay dormant due to time constraints, we suggest that social media novices identify between three to five platforms that will help achieve their professional goals and engage them extensively.

As for which sites to choose--that's your call. Lawyers are such a diverse lot that it's difficult to identify social media platforms that will serve all lawyers' goals. If pressed, we advise a presence on "the big three"--Linked-In, Twitter and Facebook--because of their high traffic numbers and diverse user base. Using these platforms you can reach a vast assortment of potential business contacts: from Fortune 500

companies (LinkedIn) to small business and consumers (Facebook) to traditional media, start-ups and high tech (Twitter).

V. Other factors to consider when choosing additional social media platforms

Areas of practice and target audience: Some social media tools are more popular with certain audiences than others. Generally speaking, Avvo or Facebook Fan Pages tend to work best for lawyers representing consumer clients; large firm lawyers may fare better at sites like LinkedIn, LegalOnRamp or Martindale-Connected, which attract in-house counsel and corporate clients.

Likewise, consider whether you're targeting other attorneys or the general population. Some sites, like JD Supra, LegalOnRamp or Martindale Connected are frequented by, or entirely limited to lawyers, while Linked-In or Scribd will give you access to a more general population.

Personality and Preference: Choose social media tools that you're comfortable with so you'll be more likely to use them frequently. If you have a passion for writing and analysis, blogging is likely a good fit. By contrast, if you enjoy staying on top of information 24/7 and quick paced banter, you may find that Twitter is more your style.

Goals: Lawyers have different goals in engaging social media. If you're looking for media exposure, Twitter or blogging are effective since both attract reporters seeking information. Women lawyers seeking to build relationships with other women professionals might try looking for Ning communities or Linked-In groups. If you can't find established groups that meet your needs, social media makes it easy to start your own!

Conclusion

Social media is not a passing fad, but rather, a powerful tool that is changing the way that the world interacts and communicates. Lawyers may be slower than others to adapt, but those who are first to jump on board will hold a significant advantage. Why not ladies first?

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