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Time to get on the bandwagon?

John Timperley and Michelle Daniels of The Results Consultancy ask whether social networks are a useful way to reach clients

It's funny how, when a new communication vehicle arrives, everyone hopes it will be the one channel to reach their whole market. Often, it just increases the number of routes we have to communicate with an individual or business. The general counsel in one business will prefer one mode of communication and the head of legal in an organisation down the road another. In reality, communication and relationship building with these individuals invariably becomes more complex.

This is probably why there's currently much confusion about social networking in the legal community. Spotting how popular it has become in the US and in other sectors, some feel that they too should jump on the bandwagon. Whether it is creating online profiles on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and the like, these lawyers work hard to manage their electronic networking. In contrast, others are sceptical and opt for the old ways of forging business relationships. No one strategy is better than the other. The answer to the question 'Should I get involved in social networking?' depends on whether your target market is using it. If they are, then it makes sense. If they're not, then you are best sticking to those communication channels they do interact with. Social networking needs careful management just like any other relationship-building tool. You need to be convinced that your time and energy invested here is justified. To help you decide, we asked a number of lawyers what they saw the pros and cons of social networking to be.

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PROS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

When it came to the benefits, most lawyers liked the way the medium enabled them to keep in regular touch with their networks. Many recommended going for quality rather than quantity when building an online network. Social media enables you to profile specific thoughts and expertise (in an unobtrusive way) that broaden that network's view of you. This was particularly beneficial to lawyers who thought some contacts only knew them for one area of expertise. They also said social media allowed them to help people more – very valuable in the current climate.

Facilitating introductions, giving tips or pointing the way to small nuggets of advice were some of the examples given. As one lawyer said: 'Through the contact with the people in my network, I am able to help them formulate a far more interesting impression of me, and differentiate what I do from other lawyers. It means that when a need arises, it's me rather than one of my competitors who comes to their mind.'

DOWNSIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Lawyers' main concern was that social networking can be very engrossing – they described the need for self-discipline. They also warned that if you're looking to use social networking to sell or just tell, then you'll soon lose followers. Relationship-building etiquette still applies – especially among UK users – and the best use of social networking uses the old principles of, among other things, adding value, being genuinely interested in people and keeping in touch with your network.

Lawyers from the larger firms were also concerned that their firm's 'corporate' messages might be contradicted if colleagues weren't carefully managed in their use of social media. A number of firms are currently defining their policy on social networking and giving guidance to their people in using it.

One lawyer commented: 'You should be careful of potential conflicts in your network, and be mindful of who you do or don't want to link to. Also be conscious of blending business and pleasure. You have to think carefully about what you're saying, and how what you say will affect you and your firm's overall reputation.'

IT PAYS TO PLAN

So perhaps ask yourself, what are you hoping to get out of social networking? If you are looking to it for professional purposes – developing business relationships, forging a reputation and positioning yourself as expert in a certain area – then create a plan that interacts with everything else you do in the day. This should map out:

- Your network dynamics – who would you like in the network, what conflicts should be avoided, who in your network could benefit others.
- The updates and interactions you plan to make to add value to individual network members.
- Your social media activities – the groups you join, the comments and questions you pose, the value you bring, and how regularly you'll keep in touch.

If you want to use social media for personal or social purposes, then think twice about including business contacts who might conflict with that aim – either now or in the future.

John Timperley and Michelle Daniels

Social networking and recruitment

Frank Varela of headhunters Varela & Partners explains how social media can provide an advantage as firms battle for talent

Law firms continue to look at how they can use

and capitalise on the phenomenon that is social media. One of the areas that lends itself to using such sites, and one which could significantly benefit law firms, is recruitment.

Recruitment consultancies have been quick to spot the opportunity presented by sites such as LinkedIn to identify potential candidates and then subsequently introduce these candidates to their clients for a hefty fee.

Mypeoplebiz.com, a new recruitment platform, offers law firms the opportunity to communicate directly with the members of the networking platforms, as well as other candidate suppliers, while also providing the software to manage the recruitment process.

DISPELLING MYTHS

Questions have been raised about the likelihood of lawyers taking to social networks, but all evidence points to the fact that this view is outdated. There is no doubt that law is a social profession, and in many ways law has always embraced social networks. Long before Facebook, lawyers developed the legal directories to connect, and there are multitudes of professional societies and groups.

There is a misapprehension that social platforms are about technology. They are not; they are about people. The judicious use of technology can better align firms' recruitment needs and candidates, reducing costs and improving value.

As the world becomes increasingly reliant on technology for communication, the legal profession is noticing a shift towards more effective online communication, knowledge sharing and networking. Indeed, the Networks for Counsel survey 2008 revealed that almost 50% of lawyers are members of online social networks, and more than 40% believe professional networking has the potential to change the business and practice of law over the next five years. Lawyers are clearly on their way to embracing social networking, and this is not as surprising as some may think. After all, lawyers have always used various methods of networking – referrals or recommendations from clients and peers are generally considered to be the most effective means. Relationship-based methods, such as in-person networking events and alumni groups, are also considered powerful. These traditional activities are migrating increasingly online.

It is true that there is a clear generation gap in attitudes towards online networking. Sixty-seven per cent of 25 to 35 year olds, 49% of 36 to 45 year olds, and 36% of 46+ year olds reported membership of an online social network. But this is still a large enough proportion of lawyers, particularly at associate level, to make targeting online social networks worthwhile.

GETTING RESULTS

All of these indicators point to a huge opportunity for law firms to radically slash their recruitment costs, as well as widening the candidate pool. Mypeoplebiz has been created to provide a recruitment platform that will help law firms manage recruitment processes, as well as infiltrate the social networks, and achieve a 30% to 50% saving on recruitment spending.

Whether we are in a boom or in a slowdown, the type of savings and the potential for better recruitment available through this new medium are compelling.

So far, the feedback on social networking and the mypeoplebiz portal is very encouraging. Devonshires used it to recruit two new solicitors at vastly reduced fees and benefited from the use of the applicant tracking software that comes free with the site.

Kingsley Napley has also been handling its recruitment through the portal, and finance director Darren Jesse says: 'The potential for new candidates generated through the social networks and referrals generally is vast, and certainly something that we recognise as valuable and that could save significant fees for Kingsley Napley. We also liked the ability of the tracking system to tell us where candidates are coming from and to manage their applications electronically, and the ability to negotiate a fee upfront and to cap the fee without having to have lots of negotiations with numerous recruiters is of great benefit.'

The other big issue is diversity. As we saw recently with the furore that was created by Eversheds' simple wish to see a more diverse range of candidates than



FRANK VARELA is the founder of headhunters Varela & Partners and has 18 years of management experience in the executive search/recruitment area, having recruited over 100 partners for law firms

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was being provided by the legal recruitment industry, there are law firms that do not feel that they are gaining access to a broad enough range of people. Opening recruitment up beyond the usual suspects of the legal recruitment industry to the rich varied pool of social networkers out there should not only generate a good pool of referrers, but also a good range of candidates that might otherwise not be forthcoming.

Social platforms are about people and therefore present a great opportunity for law firms.

Frank Varela