



## Becoming the Connected Attorney: Lawyers and social networks

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Lawyers, by nature and practice, should be hesitant, cautious and risk-averse. Those are hardly the adjectives to describe social networks, the Internet's new Wild West of communication forums. But are these networks so dangerous and scary that attorneys and law firms should avoid them and stick with the age-old "safe" forms of marketing: boat cruises, sponsored events, bylined articles and personal networking?

No. To ignore social networking is to lose valuable opportunities to:

- Broaden a firm or individual lawyer's brand and public recognition.
- Promote and evangelize the work of practice groups and practitioners.
- Attract new clients.

**Who's using social media?** The rapid rise of social networks is stunning. Take a quick look at the numbers:

- As of June 2009, 840,000 people working in the legal industry were on the social networking site Linked in, according to Web strategy firm Stem. That same month, the network touted 40 million users.
- People ages 35-54 are the fastest growing demographic among Facebook users (Corbett, 2009). This network has more than 250 million active users who log in at least once daily (Facebook, 2009).
- Twitter may be setting new records for Website growth. Its accounts grew 1,382 percent from February 2008 to February 2009. Its users are primarily ages 35-49, and 62 percent of them access the service from work (Michelle McGiboney, 2009). Twitter also has an attrition problem, with 60 percent of its users failing to return a month after they've signed up (David Martin, 2009).

Social networks are easy to understand: people like to talk. But knowing how to use a social network to effectively grow business and professional relationships is another matter entirely. It's about much more than chitchat and clever status updates delivered in 140 characters or less. If you're interested in

growing your business using social media, you'll need to commit time and effort. Lesson one in taking the social network plunge is this: just getting wet doesn't make you a diver.

Now let's get started.

**Address the fear.** Before we discuss the benefits of social networks, it's important to address the fears typically expressed by lawyers who are unsure of whether or how to use them. Yes, there are reasons to tread carefully, but it's important to remember that these networks are merely an extension of what we're all accustomed to: writing, publishing, interacting and managing a database.

**Fear #1: I will tweet something that compromises a client or my firm.** Though Twitter limits messages to 140 characters, plenty of professionals have managed to cause big problems in that small amount of space. Twitter is about creating conversations, and a majority of them are interpersonal and shared with groups. There is at the moment no confidentiality on Twitter outside of direct messaging. Once a message is placed on Twitter, it is theoretically accessible to the world. "Lawyers must pay particular attention to the risks of revealing privileged or confidential information in Twitter messages, which are often programmed to be sent to a group of friends and acquaintances," wrote Stephen C. Bennett in the NYSBA Journal (Bennett, 2009). By their very training, attorneys should know how to be cautious with words. Those practiced should be able to walk the line between loquaciousness and brevity to "tweet" messages that serve marketing goals.

**Fear # 2: I'd like to use Facebook, but don't want to show too much of my personal life to the world.** There are plenty of stories about the wacky behavior on Facebook of otherwise astute business executives (dead bat collection, anyone?). Facebook comments and posts have gotten people fired, cost them job opportunities or promotions and have caused embarrassment to businesses. Facebook can also cut into productivity and become an addictive and intrusive social outlet. Like any traditional business outreach program, a Facebook account needs to be managed, groomed and maintained. Lawyers should consider it an intersection of personal and professional attitude, and they should handle it as thoughtfully as they would any other part of a marketing program. One rule of thumb is to present yourself as the kind of person you'd like to work– and then go from there.

**Fear # 3: There are so many networks. How do I choose which one to spend my time on?** Among Facebook, Linked in, Legal OnRamp, My Space, Plaxo, Spoke and Twitter (not to mention YouTube and Vimeo), there are a staggering number of choices. The fear is not only in knowing what to pick, but what to say and how these networks work together. It is not necessary to groom and maintain an active presence in all these outlets, but instead to find a winning combination that advances your marketing agenda. A clear understanding of the opportunities each popular social network presents and the level of commitment necessary to garner results from network use will help an attorney tailor an approach that works with his or her bandwidth, expectations and experience.

**Fear # 4: I will reveal all my contacts and clients to the world.** It's true, most of these sites display your contacts; the kind of contacts you wouldn't leave sitting out in a Rolodex on your desk back in the old days. If you've got contacts that you need to protect, don't post them. Social networks are a tool to develop new contacts.

## **A brief overview of the social networks:**

**Linked in:** The current king of the hill in general professional social networks. Unlike Facebook, Linked in minimizes the personal and emphasizes the professional. Linked in offers opportunities to form and join groups, conduct research on specific people, survey, recruit and review jobs. It also offers a host of useful business tools – such as company listings that could expand your firm's potential footprint. Many more options are in the works. It is the closest thing to an electronic Rolodex online. [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)

**Facebook:** Always referenced as part of the big three of social networks, along with Linked in and Twitter. While more personally focused, Facebook is nevertheless a good way to connect with a community. Options exist for company profiles, various levels of direct communication, including photo uploading and status updates. Facebook is also a good tool for tracking trends and opinions. Facebook status pages can be linked to Twitter feeds to automatically update. [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

**Twitter:** The current darling of social media pundits, most of whom agree that Twitter has created a lot of interest but has a murky future. Twitter is a micro-blogging platform that allows users to publish messages of only 140 characters. These messages are read in two ways: by followers who have subscribed to a user's "tweets," or by those following a trend that users have commented on, as indicated by the inclusion of a hashtag (#) in a tweet. Twitter is an exceptional way to chart current trends and direct individuals to specific activities, such as professional events. [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)

**Blogs:** Blogs are a very effective way to establish professional expertise if managed properly. A blog is literally a short, published commentary about the same size as a newspaper article (350-750 words). Blogs have the ability to reach many people and can serve as a marketing tool when linked from a Website, referred to in an e-mail sig or referenced in an article. The key to blogging success is the nature of content; it needs to be relevant to something of importance to you or your potential customer/audience. Blogs also need to be updated on at least a weekly basis. Check out <http://lawblogcentral.blogspot.com> for examples. Get yours at [www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com) , [www.typepad.com](http://www.typepad.com) or [www.blogspot.com](http://www.blogspot.com).

**MySpace:** If you're reading this, MySpace is not for you.

**Legal OnRamp:** A social networking site specifically for lawyers, Legal OnRamp is designed to allow the sharing of professional information. This network features message boards, highlighted blog posts, document sharing, presentations of published articles, events calendars, news, job leads and other Linked in-type features. If you're an outside counsel seeking to attract corporate business or a law student seeking to research firms for a job, Legal OnRamp is a good place to start. [www.legalonramp.com](http://www.legalonramp.com)

**Plaxo:** This site, which boasts 20 million users, is billed as an online address book and interfaces with the most commonly used address books. Plaxo will automatically update contact information when a user inputs changes. A mobile version is handy for PDA users. [www.plaxo.com](http://www.plaxo.com)

**Spoke:** This social networking tool is built around managing lists, conducting e-mail campaigns and identifying potential clients and customers through research tools. Spoke claims to allow access to 55 million people representing 2.3 million companies. Spoke is a good tool for a mail-based campaign, provided you're willing to put the time into doing the research to compile a useful list. [www.spoke.com](http://www.spoke.com)

## Putting the tools to use

View a list like the one above, and you may worry about the time hemorrhage of establishing and maintaining a presence on all of these sites – and for what return on your investment?

Remember: it's not necessary to use all these tools at once or all the time. Selecting the right tool is solely dependent on your objective, which may change based on a particular business need or situation. Combining tools will allow you to do everything from: finding a job, launching a private practice, building a practice group, marketing a firm, managing a crisis, promoting professional events, advancing a client's interests or managing relationships with the media.

Different objectives require different approaches, correct messaging and tailored management for success. And those approaches should be constructed in tandem with a marketing professional who develops an overall communications and marketing campaign. After all, a social network campaign is crafted differently from an article to be published in the ABA Journal.

Attorneys (or a practice group or law firm) wanting to test the waters of social networking should begin in ways that allow for efficient, organic growth. New users should start a campaign with a Linked in profile. One important point when writing that profile: use keywords that reflect not only you or your firm's services, but also the concepts that are important to your target client base. Smart use of these keywords will improve your profile's search rankings.

Many social-network newbies make the mistake of thinking that their Linked in profiles are an exercise that amounts to, "If I build it, they will come." They'll throw up the same bio on their Website, populate it with a few articles and links and assume they're social networkers. What they're doing is missing tremendous marketing potential. Again, what is the objective of the exercise? If it's to be online because everyone else is, then skip Linked in and go directly to Spoke. All you need is a Rolodex for someone to find you or to find others. If you're on Linked in, then make it a business mission.

For example, let's assume you're interested in building a technology or a real estate practice. Pack your Linked in profile with your published subject matter expertise, and emphasize it. Look at this as a mini-Website because it is specifically for the clientele you're trying to attract.

But a profile is just step one. The next step to community involvement on Linked in requires joining groups.

Linked in has specific search functions that allow you to view groups of all kinds and drill down into the actual membership. You can review discussions, news -- everything a group has to offer before you

apply to join. What is the objective? If it's to build business, join groups that represent potential customers. Look for groups with active discussions and a growing membership that will provide you with a healthy influx of new contacts and opinions (you're limited to 50 groups at this time). And opinions are what it's all about. If you're going to use Linked in properly, express your professional opinions.

Once you've joined groups, start discussions. If you're published, share links to your work. Linked in will alert you when someone responds to a discussion you initiated or have participated in. Engage your commentators, and start building a community. You can add them as connections while you're searching out other potential, useful contacts based on a host of definable parameters. You can also post news, links to articles, blogs and anything else you find of interest. As your network grows, you may want to start your own group and invite others to join. Want to host an event? Post it to a group to drive new attendance. Want to conduct a survey and draft an article on the results? You can do that as well. If you use Linked in properly, you may find that this one social network alone satisfies all your needs.

What about expressing your professional opinions in a more expansive manner? Instead of submitting papers to the marketing department and waiting for response, why not try blogging?

Blogs are your personal op-ed page. They're a tool for people who have a continual stream of something to say, at least on a weekly basis. You should feel motivated, not obligated, to write. Blogs require a commitment. You'll need to find your voice and express it with enthusiasm and professionalism. A blog can be anything from straight opinion to news reporting and commentary. If you're looking for clients, then focus your blog on areas of interest to them. Once you've done this, you can add a live blog feed to your Linked in profile and announce each new posting in your various discussion groups to drive traffic to your blog and create additional discussions.

Now let's say you want to comment on something immediately or in the moment. It's on your mind, and you want to let it out. This may be the time to add Twitter to your social-networking toolbox.

Twitter users approach this social network very differently. Many want to amass followers and comment on every waking moment of life – which is why a recent survey concluded that 40 percent of the content on Twitter is meaningless babble (Analytics, 2009). That shouldn't be your approach. Use Twitter carefully, and you will be rewarded.

Your Twitter use should follow two paths simultaneously: one that establishes a sound base of subjects on which you become an expert commentator, the other cultivates a strong base of "followers."

Everyone on Twitter has to start somewhere, so know that having absolutely no followers does not preclude you from entering a conversation. You can join a hot topic by using hashtags and commenting. You will more than likely pick up followers who are interested in what you have to say. At the same time, you can use Twitter's search features to find people with similar interests and opinions. They may work in industries that could use your services.

Once you've established a beachhead in the Twitter community, you can cross-promote your blog and feed your tweets to your Linked in profile page. You may be motivated to tweet once a day, multiple times a day or just a few times a week.

Though Twitter has great potential for marketing, it's best used as a support mechanism for more robust community platforms, such as Linked in and Facebook.

Speaking of Facebook, do you need your own page if you're already on Linked in and regularly blogging and tweeting? That's up to you. Maybe you would like to use photos and videos to tell your story. Maybe you would like more of your personal side to show. Facebook is the best social network for these things. It's also considered one of the premier sites for developing new business because, like Linked in, it allows users to connect with interest groups. Facebook could extend your range of networking activities and provide an even bigger source of contacts.

All the services we've discussed have mobile applications, allowing you to add content or commentary on the fly. The more you use specific key terms consistent with your marketing goals, the better your practice or firm will do in search engine results. Organic search creates a direct opportunity for potential clients who are actively seeking services to find you. If you've got a budget and want to approach Search Engine Optimization and Search Engine Marketing from a scientific perspective, find a professional or a firm to help you.

### **Tying it together: The Connected Attorney**

At this point in your progression, you've established a network and a voice. You've made connections and even may have generated some new business leads. You've kept your messages on point in ways that showcase your expertise and value.

Now you're ready for even more outlets for professional exposure.

Repurposing your content – make that your intellectual property -- is just as important as developing the content in the first place. It's time to get your professional Website in on this act. Your site could be Web 2.0-enabled and house most of the material you're developing. You can install Facebook Connect and extend the community conversation into your site. You can begin producing videos that appear not only on your site, but also on your own channel on YouTube or Vimeo. You can use Widgetbox ([www.widgetbox.com](http://www.widgetbox.com)) to create widgets of your Twitter and Blog feeds to populate your website.

The Connected Attorney in action can attend a conference, upload some video to Facebook, add some comments through Twitter, write a blog post and report to their network on Linked in and Legal OnRamp. This relatively easy exercise stands to yield tremendous gain. Do you think potential clients would be more likely to hire someone who is active, opinionated, in touch, sharing and tracking current trends germane to their businesses? Instead of explaining these characteristics, the Connected Attorney can actually demonstrate them with an easily searchable online body of material. In an increasingly competitive professional services environment this represents an edge.

If you take an organic approach to social networking, devote time to developing a voice and identifying an audience, and if you groom a database of contacts thoughtfully, the world of social networks can be rewarding. But long before someone becomes a Connected Attorney, he or she must first consider the marketing message itself and develop a program that reflects an engaging point of view that naturally attracts followers, readers and, ultimately, clients. Let the goal dictate the type of involvement you have in social media, and let your time constraints and expertise dictate the level of your involvement. Being a truly Connected Attorney means you understand the power of the online community and interact with social networks as naturally as you would answer a phone or reply to an e-mail. It's the next step in communication. Take it.

### **About the author**

Steven J. Lundin is the Chief Hunter and Gatherer of BIGfrontier Communications Group, a boutique communications firm in Chicago. Lundin is a published writer and award-winning communications expert who has been engaged in hybrid, traditional and social networking campaigns for more than a decade. He has consulted for many Illinois law firms, technology companies and professional services firms. He has thrice been named one of the Top 100 most influential people in Chicago's technology community (2000, Chicago Sun-Times, 2001, I-Street magazine, 2002: I-Street). In 2004, the BIGfrontier newsletter was awarded the prestigious Spotlight Award by the League of American Communications Professionals. Lundin can be found on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter (@bigfrontier), [www.blogfrontier.org](http://www.blogfrontier.org), [www.bigfrontier.com](http://www.bigfrontier.com) and [www.bigfrontier.org](http://www.bigfrontier.org). He can be reached directly at (312) 602-2434 or [slundin@bigfrontier.com](mailto:slundin@bigfrontier.com)

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