

Social media, a handy business development tool

By Crystal Mathew, Marketing Manager, Smith Debnam



Although social media has become as commonplace for some as brushing their teeth before bed, many attorneys would prefer a dental visit to embracing this mode of constant communication. For the skeptic, using this technology means more emails, less time to work, and increased liability exposure. What they fail to recognize is the potential to grow their business, capture higher quality clients, and increase their network of resources.

As marketing manager for the 23-attorney firm of Smith Debnam, I encourage our attorneys to utilize social media, specifically LinkedIn, as another marketing tool to develop their practices. In fact, at our firm's recent attorney retreat, we put together an entertaining presentation to demonstrate the basics of LinkedIn and how to best use this tool to benefit their practices and expand their professional networks. The presentation was well received by our attorneys and compelled some of our skeptics to finally jump on board. Social media may not be for everyone, but each attorney should learn the potential value of using it as a means to grow their network and explore ways to make the most of their online presence.



Social media provides access

LinkedIn operates the world's largest professional network on the Internet. The popularity of this site among professionals provides you with easy access to people whom you may have otherwise never met. It allows you the opportunity to connect with business professionals from your past, present, and future.

Throughout our firm's history, we have seen the overwhelming majority of our new business generated from word of mouth referrals. Without diminishing the proven effectiveness of face to face communication, intentional use of social media has complemented our marketing efforts by enhancing existing relationships and facilitating more frequent communication with our attorneys' professional networks.

Social media helps keep you current with your business relationships. For instance, did you misplace the business card of that executive you met at a tradeshow in San Francisco? Not to worry - getting back to the office and inviting him to connect on LinkedIn is a very acceptable way of pursuing that contact. Have you lost touch with your old college roommate who you heard is working as in-house counsel for a Fortune 500 company? Losing touch is becoming a thing of the past. Chances are, your old roomie has a LinkedIn account and will gladly accept your invitation to connect.

LinkedIn is like a magic rolodex where your contacts update their own information regarding new locations, job changes, and cell phone numbers.

Social media is targeted

The true beauty of social media is that it is targeted. The ability to join groups within LinkedIn is a great way to connect and communicate with those with whom you have shared interests. At some point in your career, you've probably sent out a firm announcement or an article to your entire client database. You may have received one or two responses, but the truth is that the vast majority of your database may not care that your construction law attorney is speaking at a lead paint seminar in the fall. But, members of the Home Builders Association group on LinkedIn will most certainly be interested. With LinkedIn, you're communicating with people who choose to receive information because they are interested in a particular topic or industry. LinkedIn makes it easy to reach your target audience about their interests.

Social media is interactive

Connecting with your professional network is an excellent business development tool, and LinkedIn makes it easy to get noticed within your network. Post an interesting article to your profile, and within minutes, all your connections have the potential to see your name, face, and article pop up in their news feed.

Additional ideas to get attention include monitoring dialogues in your groups and looking for opportunities to share your expertise by commenting on other's posts. Principles of good communication and effective networking also apply to social media. Don't just post good news about you or your firm. Look for specific ways to help others by sharing your expertise or connecting them to others to solve their problems. Instead of just posting an article you wrote, create a dialogue by prefacing your article with a question to solicit a response from your audience.

Now what?

You may never be glued to your Facebook app like your 15-year old daughter, but you should make a concerted effort to put your best foot forward online if you're going to test the waters of social media. Your LinkedIn page will often rank higher in search engines than a bio on your firm's website, making it worthwhile to take the time to create a thoughtful and well-written profile. Here are some ways to make the most of your LinkedIn presence:

- **Upload a photo and make it professional.** A photo of you on your back deck with an adult beverage may be appropriate for Facebook, but likely not the professional image you want to portray to potential business contacts. Post a photo that shows the way you look in your everyday professional environment.
- **Create a compelling profile.** To help match you with new connections, thoroughly populate your profile with background information including your experience, education, and other professional information. Try to use descriptive keywords in your copy to help people quickly learn what you do and how you can help them. Your profile should focus on your professional work, but at the

same time scream approachability and highlight your personality. Try not to make your profile read like your website bio. Using first person and adding interesting facts can make a world of difference.

- **Be careful.** As with any marketing communication, consult your local State Bar Ethics Rules to be sure nothing on your profile is worded in an inappropriate way. Also, be careful not to post information that you wouldn't want fellow or future colleagues to know, such as confidential client information or private company business. As with any form of communication, just use good judgment.
- **Build your connections.** As a rule of thumb, accept and initiate connections with others who share your professional interests and can help you meet your goals.
- **Get involved.** Joining LinkedIn groups such as State Bar Associations, professional trade groups, or alumni associations is a great way to enhance your network and give you a platform to share and acquire expertise.
- **Adjust your settings.** LinkedIn allows you to modify your privacy settings and preferences. You can control everything from who sees your connections to how many email notifications you receive from your LinkedIn account. I suggest spending some time evaluating these options and setting them according to your comfort level.

Social media takes time

Yes, social media does take time, but so does building all relationships, which is a key part of growing a successful practice. Once you become familiar with the application, make it a priority to check your profile at least once a week, invite people you may know to connect, and get a feel for what you think others may be interested in learning about you and your profession. Social media should never take the place of taking a client out to lunch or picking up the phone, but it can provide increased communication and a never-ending list of professional resources.

Finally, social media is unique to you. Don't send this article to your marketing manager and tell him or her to "become you" and manage your account. While your marketing manager may be very capable at helping you build your profile and learn the navigation, you are the only one who can make social media work for you. By following a few simple guidelines, social media can be another tool to build your reputation and get positive attention from those who may be looking for your services. Give it a try. It's fairly painless.

About the author

Crystal Mathew is the Marketing Manager for Smith Debnam Narron Drake Saintsing & Myers, LLP headquartered in Raleigh, NC. She is Chair for the Raleigh City Group of the Legal Marketing Association Southeast Chapter, serves on the Primerus Marketing Partners & Marketing Staff Executive Committee, and is a member of the Raleigh Chamber's Young Professionals Network.