

How Web 2.0 Is Changing Business Development

By Elonide Semmes, *President, Right Hat*

Back when the World Wide Web was still in its infancy, I gave a presentation to a major New England law firm, urging them to invest in a firm Web site, as opposed to just a single Web page—a notion that was met with a skepticism bordering on scorn. The crowning moment came when one of the senior partners stood up, proclaimed the Internet a passing fancy unworthy of his time, and stormed out of the room.

Fast forward to last month, when once again I found myself in front of a law firm's management committee. As we reviewed the marketing initiatives for 2009, I asked how they planned to address the myriad issues surrounding the emergence of Web 2.0—blogs, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Martindale Hubbell's Legal OnRamp, among others. Half the group looked at me with blank expressions, while the other half began deposing me like prosecutors facing a Madoff co-conspirator. It occurred to me that the wheel probably faced acceptance problems as well.

The term "Web 2.0" means many different things to many different people. But for the purpose of this article, let's focus on four of the key tools that are even now changing the ways we in the business community connect with each other and, increasingly, how we get our information. They are:

1. Blogging
2. Microblogging, in particular Twitter.
3. Social networking
4. Online News, including RSS and podcasting

Why should you care about these tools? Because once you learn to use them, they offer novel, cost-effective ways to build your reputation, enhance your brand, and—bottom line—land new clients.

Let's take these tools one at a time:

Blogging

The beauty of a blog is that it allows individual lawyers—and smaller law firms—to write for a wide audience without the prohibitive costs associated with print publishing. Since a blog can be implemented through any number of free or low-cost services, the barrier to entry is minimal. The more successful legal blogs—those with the largest and most devoted audiences—tend to focus on one area of the law or on legal trends in a particular industry.

Of course, most blogs don't succeed in finding their audience. There are many reasons for this.

First, most legal blogs lack attitude. If all you have to offer is a simple listing of recent developments, that information can be obtained elsewhere. If, on the other hand, you can provide subjective analysis from a real point of view, readers will respond.

Second, most blogs don't add value. Your content must teach, inform, entertain—or preferably all three—to give your readers something new they can use to perform their job better.

Finally, many blogs simply aren't timely enough to make them worth reading. You not only need to stay current, you also need to post to your blog on a regular basis. If you are lax about writing it, there is no reason to suppose your audience will want to read it.

Microblogging

Microblogging is blogging on a tiny scale. It lets you write and publish brief updates—typically between 140 and 200 characters—on “what you are doing.” Twitter is the most prominent of the microblogging services but there are many others, including Jaiku and Tumblr. As the publisher, you can either let everyone view your writings, or restrict them to a group that you define.

Does microblogging make sense in the legal industry? Although there are not many success stories to point to as of yet, its emerging relevance as a ‘breaking news’ outlet is undeniable. The power of microblogs is in their immediacy, in their ability to respond to events virtually as they happen, whether it’s a verdict just reached, a regulation just issued, an opinion just rendered, or any piece of news occurring in real time.

By combining a microblog with a regular blog, you can create instant discourse on virtually any subject. Simply initiate the discussion in brief on the microblog—which reaches a wide range of potential participants—then link those who are interested to your own blog, where the larger discussion can then take place.

Microblogs are, in this way, a potent marketing tool that can help establish expertise and thought leadership for you or your firm.

Social Networking

LinkedIn, Plaxo, Facebook, Legal OnRamp, the ABA’s LegallyMinded, and Martindale-Hubbell’s Connected are at the heart of legal networking today. But where to start? Which one to use?

Although it is too early to say which of these social networks will ultimately dominate, consider this: LinkedIn has over 39 million members in 200 countries—with someone signing up every second. And Facebook just passed 200 million users. On the other hand, the newcomer—Martindale-Hubbell’s Connected (formally launched in March)— has only 3,000 users so far, but it’s exclusively for lawyers.

So in the absence of a clear winner, it is best to join all of the more prominent services. But recognize that these networks connect professionals with a speed and ease that just wasn’t possible in the past, so they require a certain amount of time

and attention on your part. It’s important to keep your profiles current and to stay top-of-mind with the connections you make. These networks usually send out daily or weekly “update summaries” to designated connections, which is a handy, low-maintenance way to both see and be seen by “your public.”

Online News

While most law firms long ago embraced receiving their newsletters and alerts via the Internet, they’ve been slower to adopt other online publishing tools such as podcasts and RSS feeds. Each of these should be carefully considered as you weigh the best ways to publish your firm’s intellectual capital.

Podcasts are audio files that can be automatically delivered directly to a desktop computer, and then transferred, if desired, to an iPod, iPhone, smartphone or other MP3 player. Just like newsletters, podcasts may be subscribed to, using software such as iTunes or My Yahoo.

They are useful for communicating intricate subjects in a lively way, allowing you to record and disseminate events such as roundtables, expert interviews, regular panels, or even your own “radio blog”—the audio equivalent of an email newsletter—relatively easily and cheaply.

RSS feeds let your prospects and clients stay informed about your firm’s current thinking without the clutter of an email blast. Visitors to your firm’s Web site are invited to sign up for an RSS feed and pre-select the subjects they’re interested in. When new content comes up on those subjects, the user is notified and can then click through to the Web page where that content resides. RSS feeds can dramatically improve the likelihood that your content will be seen.

While we’ve just scratched the surface here, I hope it is clear that a number of advanced business development tools are now available to law firms willing and able to explore them. Much of the power of these technologies rests in how well they’re integrated with your other, more traditional, marketing tools, as well as with your overall marketing plan.

Web 2.0 tools will continue to face the kinds of skepticism described at the top of this article. The sooner you adopt them, the greater your success at building a Web presence will be but hurry up as Web 3.0 is already a few mouse clicks away. ■

About Right Hat

Right Hat specializes in strategic brand consulting and design for professional services firms. We work with firms, large and small, to create marketing programs that are memorable and transforming.