

PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT SPECIAL ISSUE: BRANDING YOURSELF ONLINE

Branding Yourself Online: Tips for Spinning Your Story with Blogs And Other Social Media

[By Jayne Navarre and David Freeman](#)

There has been an explosion of ways lawyers can use the Internet to build a personal brand. Here are tips for spinning your story with blogs and other social media.

The art of being top of mind with your target market boils down to being memorable. But you can't be memorable if you're not doing anything to get noticed by those who seek your skills. One of the best routes to getting noticed these days is by creatively cultivating a personal brand on the Web. Over the past several years, there has been an explosion of ways lawyers can use the Internet to build a personal brand and keep that brand in front of those they seek to influence. Here's some advice on how to navigate this often-confusing world of new tools. A personal brand is a set of skills or characteristics that distinguish you from the competition. When you have a good brand, others will assume you possess those skills or characteristics whenever they see or hear your name. It is therefore your job as a marketer to (1) clearly understand the impressions you want others to have of you, (2) identify tools you can use to get this message into the minds of those you seek to influence, and (3) communicate consistently, regularly and repeatedly to build relationships and keep yourself top of mind with your target audience. Using the Web to achieve this has never been easier, given that tools such as blogs, social networks, podcasts and Twitter are available 24-7, can reach around the world, and achieve a viral effect by passing information from person to person exponentially.

Your personal brand may encompass more than just your practice area. Some lawyers also communicate their style, their tactics, their personal passions, or even connections to pop culture. (One lawyer, for example, writes a blog on the employment issues that can be identified after each episode of the TV show "The Office.")

However, building a brand in your field of law still means keeping the focus on your practice expertise. Since topical blogs are terrific tools for demonstrating knowledge about a specific area of law, let's start with those.

There's A Lot to Be Said for a Niche

Topical blogs are magnets for drawing traffic through keyword optimization, increasing the odds that people will find you when they search the Web for fresh, relevant content on your topic. Blogs also attract return visitors and new readers who find content via search engines long after first publication. A topical blog is probably the most effective way for lawyers to build a brand online. However, in the crowded world of legal Web sites, the narrower your niche is the more you can stand out.

As just one example, let's consider Chris Cheatham, an associate with Watt, Teider, Hoffar & Fitzgerald in McLean, Virginia, who's a fairly new entrant into the blogosphere. He is a construction attorney and LEED Accredited Professional who is branding himself as a lawyer with a unique understanding of green building strategies—a field in which laws and regulations are rapidly developing and where market interest will only climb. To complement his non-Web marketing initiatives, Cheatham launched the blog GreenBuildingLawUpdate.com in July 2008. Cheatham updates his blog with new posts about three times per week. He writes during the weekend, but admits that he commits quite a bit of time every day developing ideas for posts.

He also keeps up with other blogs on green building topics and shares his ideas to help build key relationships (online and live at conferences). So not only is blogging establishing a brand for this young lawyer, it also keeps him up to date while building a new pool of potential referral sources. Visitors to his bio on the Watt, Teider Web site are linking through to his blog as well. The return on the investment, he reports, continues to surprise him only months into the venture.

Of course, since the key to personal branding is communicating your message consistently, regularly and repeatedly, the longer you stick with blogging, the greater your odds of reaping the big rewards. In fact, over time, the best blogs make their owners' names practically synonymous with their topics of expertise.

Take, for example, Tom Goldstein. He's co-chair of the firmwide litigation and Supreme Court practice groups at Akin Gump in Washington, D.C., and also teaches at both Harvard and Stanford Law Schools. Goldstein argued his 20th U.S. Supreme Court case in December. As a six-year veteran blogger with a name brand like no other lawyer on the Internet, he can tell you how extremely valuable blogging is as a reputation builder.

Goldstein and his wife gave birth to SCOTUSblog.com when they were practicing law together out of their home office and decided to do a blog dedicated to coverage of the Supreme Court. Blogs were just getting started at the time, but his gut told him it was a good idea. So they opened a Blogger.com account and the very first day they got 50 hits.

Fast-forward to the present. Today SCOTUSblog.com, which is now sponsored by Goldstein's firm, has a team of contributors and is considered one of the nation's premier legal sites. During the closing day of the last U.S. Supreme Court session, the blog had more than 300,000 hits—or about several hundred hits a second. On an ordinary day, the number of hits reaches an average of 12,000. Add to that the 16,000 hits received by SCOTUSwiki.com, a wiki Goldstein started that documents summaries of Supreme Court cases and briefs, and you have a very influential brand. So influential that it tops out on the Drudge Report and gets links in from major mainstream media blogs.

The brand continues to expand with other Web 2.0 outlets. There is now a [SCOTUSblog](http://SCOTUSblog.com) video channel on YouTube and a [SCOTUSblog](http://SCOTUSblog.com) podcast feed available through iTunes. The entire package showcases the expertise of Goldstein and his practice group at Akin Gump, demonstrates the high level at which the firm operates, and also acts as an exceptional recruiting tool.

Best Practices When Blogging

Anyone who has ever tried blogging knows that you have to post frequently—and write well—to make an impact. Having multiple contributors also has many advantages. Goldstein, for instance, uses

writers within and outside of his firm, which allows the blog to cover a broader range of issues and ensures there will always be new entries. Inviting people to participate can also be used to build relationships with target prospects and referral sources.

In addition, proactive lawyers and firms wisely institute formal policies and guidelines for blog communications to address legal implications, disclaimers and editorial oversight. As an example, before launching his blog—even though it's independently branded—Cheatham drafted a memorandum outlining his plan as well as the potential legal implications, and he works closely with a partner in his firm who reviews his posts and gives feedback prior to publishing. He also moderates his blog's comment section and approves comments before they appear live.

Bloggers should also obtain client approval before naming specific law firm projects or clients.

Using Other Social Media Tools

And now for a quick look at some other Web 2.0 branding devices. Having a profile on LinkedIn, Facebook or lawyer-peer social networking sites such as Legal OnRamp is a growing way to boost a personal brand online. As with blogging, though, you must be active on the site if you're going to see a benefit—merely posting a profile is not social networking. You should schedule regular time, at least three times a week, to devote to your marketing efforts on sites such as these. Never forget that building solid relationships takes time, and regular contact with your targets is essential.

That's what makes RSS feeds another great tool, because they let readers sign up to *automatically* receive news alerts, e-mail updates and other content from you, including feeds of your new blog postings. You can even prompt them to add a comment. (After all, a blog without comments is just a Web site.) Pushing out relevant content and helpful information keeps people coming back for more—and keeps you top of mind with them. If you really want to ratchet it up, you'll want to get plugged in to one of the microblogging social networks like Twitter. (See Erik Mazzone's Legal Web 2.0 column in this issue.)

When you join and participate in Twitter, you are entering a nonstop conversation with one or one thousand Twitterers—the number of recipients is your choice. Twitter posts, though, are limited to 140 characters. You build your network from your current contact list or use topical keywords in your "tweets" (i.e., your posts) to attract new followers who find you by searching for relevant conversations. In this way you can enlarge your sphere of influence. You can also elect to follow others and join their conversations. It's easy to get started and after a while will be productive for building your brand. Chris Cheatham has a brand on Twitter and often sends people to his blog posts by inserting URLs to drive traffic and prospective new relationships.

Some additional points about all of these tools: Social computing for business development and branding may not be for everyone. First, you have to like sitting at a computer. You have to like writing (at least a little bit) and you have to have an open mind to learning, listening, exploring, reading and maybe even failing. The verdict is still out on whether any or all of it will be censored or severely restricted by the rules of professional conduct, but for now, the watchword is that everything you do or say online is subject to the same offline rules. (See "Thoughts on the Ethics of Web 2.0" by Will Hornsby in this issue.) You can still have a lot of fun branding yourself online, yet cautious and conservative will serve you well. Remember, anything you post through the Web can live on forever. That should not keep you from participating, but it should keep you on your toes.

It Comes Down to Collaboration

One thing that many people miss when they first get involved in social computing is that Web 2.0 is inherently multidimensional—it's educational and collaborative by nature. That's why it works so well for lawyers who want to get their name out there and build relationships. It's about give and take. You don't give advice, you just give your audience a passionate interest in a topic, make it a worthwhile conversation, pose thoughtful questions for discussion and offer insights, and you will build a brand. If you want to push your message without feedback or conversation, better stick to the traditional forms of advertising. But ask yourself this: With all the clients, prospects, referral sources and potential law firm recruits that are already immersed in the Web 2.0 world, will the competition ultimately leave you in the dust if you don't join in, too?

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