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An ALM Publication

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Social Media Benefits for Lawyers

BY STEVE THOMAS

In an October 14 article, the Wall Street Journal poked fun at Corporate America for social media campaigns that “put people to sleep,” encouraging business leaders to take pointers from the masters of online marketing—celebrities. With that, frightening images come to mind of C-level Fortune-500 execs posting bathroom selfies or tweeting hateful zingers about “body image” or each other’s clothes.

But when it comes to boring social media, lawyers take top prize. All those blog posts on the upcoming revisions to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure or new regulations governing drones rarely gar-

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ner any followers. Nobody worries about crashing servers because a community property article might go viral.

The numbers alone suggest a sad tale. Compared to Rihanna’s 81.5 million “Likes,” the Facebook page for Norton Rose Fulbright boasts only 1,751. Paltry as that sounds, it gets worse—NRF employs more than 3,800 lawyers. Maybe some don’t “like” it there.

A single tweet from Taylor Swift reaches 64.7 million gushing fans, while many lawyers hear “hashtag” and think “breakfast.” Arguably America’s best-known attorney, President Barack Obama, has only five million Twitter followers, and the lawyer who is the Democratic front-runner contending for his job—Hillary Clinton—has about that same number. (Note that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg (a/k/a Notorious RBG) has garnered significant fame within the social media community but does not appear to even have a Twitter account.)

Of course, the numbers draw the wrong picture. As the WSJ article concedes, celebrities can be “risqué and irreverent” in ways that would decimate the image of a company or law firm. But the differences go beyond that. Celebrities carry people away from reality to somewhere more fun, more glamorous—somewhere not real, at least for the viewer. On the other hand, companies use catchy slogans with colorful characters or sleek photography to imprint positive brand recognition—State Farm is there for you, Geico will save you 15 percent on car insurance. Trust the brand.

All those blog posts on the upcoming revisions to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure or new regulations governing drones rarely garner any followers. Nobody worries about crashing servers because a community property article might go viral.

But lawyers ask one and all for their deepest, most sensitive trust. Philosophical parsing and ivory-tower theories get kicked aside by the stark reality that people tend to put morality and justice in the same bucket. Lawyers are seen as the gatekeepers of right and wrong. Courts say the relationship requires “utmost good faith” from the attorney.

The WSJ article appears to be part of a more broad disconnect between marketing and media groups that wholeheartedly embrace and promote all forms of social media (including firms that provide consulting and advice on legal marketing) and the real-world sensitivities and experiences of practicing lawyers and business professionals who work hard to build trust. That’s a different job than entertaining. Different jobs call for different tools and methods.

The question with social media is simple: Why do people care enough to read the posts, receive the tweets, browse the images,



and otherwise spend time with the posted content? Professionals who simply generate content for content’s sake are throwing message-filled bottles into the ocean. The concept of “find a need and fill it” applies equally to social media—until the company, law firm, or lawyer identifies a very specific need among specifically targeted groups that can be efficiently addressed by a particular platform in a very specific way, it’s all just noise, even an annoying distraction for busy recipients.

In other words, don’t look for ways social media can garner more clients. Ask how social media can deliver real benefits to clients and contacts.

Legal marketers trumpet the virtues of social media and accuse abstaining lawyers of being stuck in the previous century, but that assumes stupidity instead of discretion. Those same legal marketers readily admit that any social media campaign involves a significant investment of time, not just money. The lawyer or firm must post frequently, and strategically think through every post for the value it will (or will not) provide to the clients or contacts receiving it.

Lawyers definitely are hesitant about adopting social media for their profession, but that does not mean they are ignorant. The ABA’s annual Technology Survey reveals that the percentage of law firms and lawyers who use social media for professional purposes increased year after year from 2011 to 2013, but then decreased in 2014. Last year, 56 percent of firms and 75 percent of lawyers surveyed reported using LinkedIn for professional purposes. Only 34 percent of firms and 26 percent of lawyers use Facebook in their profession. But outside the office, 85 percent of responding lawyers use Facebook for personal reasons (or, said better, for social reasons).

Celebrities possibly offer the best illustration of how social media are not an end unto themselves. Beyonce Knowles, despite 64 million Facebook fans, has a grand total of 11 connections on her LinkedIn page. Kim Kardashian West’s 49 million Instagram followers care nothing about her LinkedIn account, where she has exactly one connection. The 65 million followers anxiously waiting for Taylor Swift’s next tweet are oblivious to her LinkedIn site, where she has zero connections. Brad Pitt has four connections on LinkedIn; Vin Diesel and Ben Affleck each have zero. The big LinkedIn winners in this quick review were Katy Perry and Selena Gomez, with 155 and 393 connections, respectively.

Legal marketing gurus who promote wholesale immersion in social media should be viewed with skepticism. Twitter is a tool. Facebook offers specific, but limited, benefits. Like Corporate America, lawyers and law firms are learning, experimenting, and proceeding with caution—just as they should. Possibly caution results in boring material, but when trust is on the line, bland but targeted, useful information is the way to go.



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