



Social Media a Tool for Lawyer Marketing

Introduction

The 20's has witnessed an unprecedented growth in the use of social media as a form of communication, marketing, detecting and influencing public opinion. Initially, it seemed social media could only be used informally i.e. as means of keeping in touch with friends and family however when marketing research uncovered its impact on individual tastes, preferences, style choices and eventually lifestyle it formed a major part of companies marketing budgets. Apart from the impact of social media on business its influence on public opinion and politics was forcibly drawn to our attention in the Arab spring and the very recent #bringbackourgirls# campaign on twitter. The appeal of social media is said to be in the fact that it is generated by ordinary people which makes engagement with its content more satisfying. From the foregoing it can be seen that social media is a very powerful tool for marketing for lawyers. Regrettably, it is imperative that we recognise that the advent of social media has brought with it a new wave of criminal activity such as internet fraud, identity theft and other crimes collectively known as cybercrime.

Although there are several channels of social media this article will focus on the ones that are suitable for projecting a good image for lawyer and a law firm these include blogs, LinkedIn, Twitter. A compelling statement by a legal blogger Kevin O'Keffe demonstrates the importance of social media for law firm marketing.

"Until now, people came in through the well designed and branded foyer of your law firm. Now people are coming in through the windows, backdoors, and cracks. They view what other people talk about on social media. To get people to view what you'd like them to view on your website it will be more important to work on your social media presence than to work on your website. Active and decentralized social activity by lawyers and other law firm professionals will be as important, if not more important, than website design and SEO"

Blogging

Recent statistics have shown that there over 152 million blogs on the internet and that every half second somewhere in the world a new blog is being made. According to webopedia a blog is a short form for weblog it defines it as a webpage that serves as "a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, and blogs often reflect the personality of the author". Blogging started as an online journal in the 1990 where people shared their experiences, hobbies and thoughts. By 2012 it evolved into a major publishing business for example Huffington post was sold for over 300 million.

Blogs are increasingly becoming a popular form of interaction and generate discourse between individuals from various parts of the world. In Nigeria alone several lawyers have taken to blogs to vent their personal experiences and their interface with the legal system but one wonders what led to its popularity? David Weinberger observes that the confessional nature of blogs seem to present the intersecting of the private and the public. Blogs are addressed to everyone and no one in particular. They seem to

serve no immediate purpose yet increase the number of both writers and readers thereby increasing the time devoted to them. The advantages of blogging according to Carter is that it enables lawyers discuss legal developments in their practice areas such as trusts law, energy and Intellectual property law which is beneficial to other lawyers and clients as it avails them of free legal advice. She adds that blogs are easy to use and it allows bloggers directly communicate with a large audience according to her the comment feature "allows readers to post their own comments directly to the blog, so it transforms a blog from a one-sided legal article into a discussion on the law". She further states that blogs can be used to advance the legal profession as legal advice is available to people who need it. Carter notes that the downside of blogging is that it takes time if one is to have an impact on the blogosphere and as blogs are not peer reviewed like journals there may be issues of accuracy and credibility.

The case of **HUNTER v VIRGINIA STATE BAR** deals with the ethical issues involved in blogging. Hunter, an attorney authored a blog titled "This week in Criminal Defense." The blog was not interactive and it contained posts which led to a myriad of legal and ethical issues between Hunter and The Virginia State Bar. The Virginia State Bar's contention was that Hunter's posts constituted legal advertising and violated the state's ethical principles and that the posts discussing his victories in criminal cases were misleading because there was no disclaimer on his blog and finally, that the posts were likely to embarrass or be detrimental to former

clients. Hunter's reply to these allegations were that the aim of his blog was to create a community presence for his firm. Hunter was sanctioned by the Virginia State Bar so he appealed to the Circuit Court and later the Supreme Court which held that Hunter blog was a combination of commercial and political speech so it was protected by the 1st Amendment and that he could not be forced to include a disclaimer on his blog.

The case above clearly illustrates the ethical issues that arise from blogging although the Supreme Court upheld Hunter's right to free speech we should be careful not to disclose our clients confidences or sensitive information on blogs as this might have an adverse effect on us as lawyers and the image of our law firm.

Tips on Blogging

These guidelines should be followed when blogging;

I. Your blog should not be an advertisement but it should contain your opinion on legal issues and practice areas your firm is involved in, furthermore, it should inform the public about law.

II. In addition a blog should improve the visibility of your firm in search engine results.

III. Blogging about past or present clients should be avoided as stated earlier

Conclusion

Blogging is incredibly useful in creating thought leadership and as a way of carving out a niche for your law firm in a novel area of law, thereby projecting a good image for your firm which is one of the goals of marketing.