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Social Media Marketing and Niche Legal Practices: A Match Made in Heaven

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Narrowly focused specialties are key to success in any market sector these days, and the legal profession is no exception. Some law firms and attorneys find that their experiences naturally lead them toward a certain niche, while others clearly identify their focus areas and work diligently toward obtaining the necessary experience to serve them. Regardless of how this chicken/egg scenario plays out, a targeted practice eventually develops and the firm must figure out how to attract relevant audiences and develop business opportunities. Many lawyers understand the importance of defining a niche, but these same professionals often fall short when it comes to effective business development.

A good example of how to make a highly targeted practice highly visible is the tax, trusts and estates department at Cole, Schotz, Meisel, Forman & Leonard, P.A. — in particular, its special-needs planning practice. This practice grew in response to an emerging demand to help parents establish sound estate-planning

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strategies to protect their children with special needs. Not only are there particular considerations for these parents to keep in mind, there are distinct laws and regulations to deal with when facing these delicate and often emotionally trying situations.

“The firm’s umbrella tax, trusts and estates department was already well-known,” said Melissa Shuman, director of marketing at Cole Schotz. “The group’s leadership knew that investing in business development efforts for this niche special-needs planning practice was not only a sound marketing strategy, but a key component of the group’s long-term success. Besides, in the greater scheme of things, it was an opportunity to do well by doing good.”

While the firm’s tax, trusts and estates attorneys are known for counseling individuals and businesses in a wide range of planning strategies, the ability to advise on special-needs planning is unique and requires specific knowledge in its own right.

As a result, the firm created a blog to provide families with information to help them protect and provide for their children with special needs, both now and in the future. The blog provides a mix of articles and other information from firm attorneys and other guest writers from organizations in the special-needs community.

After blogging successfully for a

period of time, the firm decided to try its hand at podcasting.

“Podcasting seemed like a natural progression from blogging, since we had regularly available content and the audience for the blog was — and is — particularly loyal in terms of readership,” explained Shuman.

Jay M. Jaffe, president and chief executive officer of Jaffe PR, applauds Cole Schotz’s online efforts.

“Digital media opportunities are, by far, the most rapidly growing but still underused and uncluttered business development tools out there today,” he said. “Unfortunately for those missing the boat, they’re also the most cost-effective — in fact, overwhelmingly free. And let’s not forget that, although law firms are used to taking their leads from peer or competitor law firms, the Internet will not always be an unending business development opportunity. Once more firms take hold, the rest will have missed their window — and that is when the clutter and resulting cost for social media implementation will skyrocket.”

The response to Cole Schotz’s blog and podcast has been fantastic, said Shuman. From an internal communications standpoint, colleagues view the practice as “connected,” which has paved the way for additional use of new online technologies at the firm. Armed with the ability to see what is working and what isn’t on the blog via on-page analytics (really not as difficult as it sounds), attorneys can tailor blog topics to those best suited to their audience’s preferences and expectations. Thanks in part to the availability of this real-time competitive intelligence, the page has become a clearinghouse for

many industry participants seeking specific information, as the site offers relevant links to external resources.

But the story doesn't end there. Cole Schotz had been using social media in earnest for about three years before launching this blog and podcast, and the firm's attorneys have participated on sites like LinkedIn and JD Supra for much longer. In addition to the special needs blog, Cole Schotz hosts six other blogs on tax, trusts and estates, bankruptcy and restructuring, corporate law, employment law, environmental and energy law, and real estate and construction law. An eighth blog, focused on intellectual property, is scheduled to launch this fall, and there is a Facebook page, as well as a newly formed Twitter account, for this practice focus.

"Rolling all of this out gradually has served the firm well," explained Shuman, who has been in legal marketing for 14 years and in her role at Cole Schotz for two-and-a-half years. "When the decision to create a social-media strategy was made, the marketing department focused on a mix of what we thought we could do well and what we could handle from an administrative standpoint. In the beginning, it mostly focused on promoting firm writings and events, because we knew we could keep up with fresh content in those two areas."

Around this same time, the firm developed a social media policy, in conjunction with its employment attorneys and HR department, to ensure that firm expectations for online behavior were clear.

"After surveying numerous law firm and legal association clients, it became clear to us that few understood the potential PR, as well as legal, nightmare they were facing on a daily basis by not implementing a clear social media policy," said Jaffe, whose PR firm offers a free social-media policy template for law firms on its website. "Offering the social-media policy template has helped, but we are still amazed by the number of firms who are so risk-averse that they are unable to see, whether or not they want their employees to participate online, that employees are doing so no matter what the firm wants. Planning ahead now saves firms from having to deal with embarrassing situations later."

Presently, approximately 80 percent of Cole Schotz attorneys are active online. There are very few attorneys who have not tried their hands at something social-media related. At a minimum, most have contributed to one of the firm's blogs or have regularly visited LinkedIn profiles. The firm has not found a need to make social media participation an expectation, because there has been consistent interest, primarily because the environment is so supportive. Marketing staff are available to consult individually with anyone wanting to learn more about social networking or develop a profile to use on one or more of the sites. With new platforms, such as Google+, popping up all the time, the firm has benefitted from supporting a few people interested in trying new sites or experimenting with new technologies.

The most tangible successes Cole Schotz has seen include inquiries from prospective clients, which have led to representations, with blogging and podcasting leading to additional writing and speaking engagements in trade and legal publications and with industry groups.

"We don't just stop at a blog post," Shuman noted. "We work to ensure that we are leveraging most of the efforts our attorneys spend on social media activities. And the converse is true: We leverage social media networks to promote publicity and events secured through other avenues. Posting an event or article on the home page of the firm's website is helpful, but it does little beyond creating a historical record that the event took place or that the piece was published. Sharing it on a social media site is what gets exposure for the event, drives up attendance and makes it interactive, encouraging folks to talk — and post — about it."

Taking a measured approach to social media and paying close attention to site analytics has helped the firm keep sight of the less-obvious correlating business development opportunities. As the comfort level with using these new technologies has increased, attorneys have certainly come to appreciate these new avenues of self-promotion and enhanced visibility.

It takes commitment, from both the attorneys and the marketing team, to maintain a consistent online presence, but many firms are seeing that the return on investment is definitely worth it. ■