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## Done right, social media a powerful tool for lawyers

BY MIKE C. GRAY AND  
ANDREW K. RYAN

With every year, it seems that the Internet and social media become more ubiquitous. As online sites and mobile applications continue to become the dominant media by which content is delivered and digested by the public, traditional platforms – such as print publications and broadcast television – cede ground. The very ways in which we consume information is changing at a rapid pace.

One need only look at the recent events in Northern Africa and the Middle East to see just how powerful the Internet and social media can be at disseminating a particular idea or message to the masses. Businesses, governments, educational institutions and others have worked diligently to harness the benefits of these increasingly influential tools by communicating often, communicating openly and communicating with purpose. What does all this mean for the legal industry? Attorneys must recognize that social media is here to stay and that, if used properly, it has the ability to be an effective business development tool.

### Communicate often

One of the greatest challenges that individuals who are unfamiliar with social media tools or are overwhelmed by their complexity and breadth is the concept of communicating often. Attorneys must recognize that the purpose of social media is to create a dialogue with your contacts about your experiences and your expertise. The only way to showcase your skills and become a resource is to participate actively in the social media world on a daily basis. From a business development standpoint, this can be extremely lucrative. First, you are, in a sense, always staying in front of your clients, prospects and business community. Being front of mind always has its benefits. Second, it gives you the opportunity to verbalize, in general terms, the types of matters that you are working on. This is extremely powerful because your clients and prospects might not always know the full range of your expertise and abilities.

Inactive participation can have negative business development implications. As more and more websites such as Above the Law and avvo.com appear, lawyers often times find themselves the target of unfair assaults. It is important to monitor these issues diligently because one search on Google by a prospective client might end in losing business or damaging your reputation. Constant communication and participation in online and so-

cial media activities is a key way to ensure that content and information that you want your clients or prospect to see trumps everything else.

### Communicate openly

In a crisis, open communication is crucial to an attorney-client relationship. No one likes it when they feel that a trusted advisor is not being forthright. This can often times be difficult, because Virginia State Bar rules restrict attorneys from divulging much, if any, information about a particular matter. If a crisis arises, it is important that attorneys and/or firms formulate a comprehensive plan which includes the dissemination of information over social media and other web-based media outlets. Those communications need to be straightforward and accurately state the firm or attorney's position. Being direct usually shuts down any negative curiosity or continued chatter online because the facts have been laid out.

A recent example of how important open communication is can be seen with the demise of Howrey. For the past several months the legal and business industry has waited to see exactly how Howrey would recover from the mass exodus of partners from its ranks. The firm's lack of open communication fueled stories in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and a variety of legal industry publications. One of the most shocking and damning points that the media pointed to was the fact that Howrey was no longer removing partners from their firm website even after they had left. Clients of the firm were uncertain of the fate of their law firm and decided to move their business to competitors. The firm also publicly stated an optimistic outlook through these many departures. Howrey's lack of open communication was one of the many fac-

tors that led to the eventual vote for dissolution.

### Communicate with purpose

Social media and the internet provide attorneys with the best way of showcasing their talents and leveraging expertise. Gone are the days when a quote in the newspaper or a published article is a one-hit-wonder. Generating media exposure is still important, but now more than ever how that coverage is leveraged and distributed is critical. Firm websites, newsletters, blogs, Twitter, LinkedIn, Martindale and other distribution channels provide attorneys with a variety of platforms to take existing content and push it out to thousands of people. A recent BTI Consulting Group study of legal executives in Fortune 1000 companies highlighted the fact that "credentialing activities" such as quotes in a newspaper, published articles and speaking engagements, are second only to peer referrals. With that in mind, it is important to position expertise in the best and most effective way possible which is through dissemination on the internet and social media.

### Final thoughts

Social media and the internet do not need to be a burden on attorneys if used effectively. They can be powerful business development tools in a world that receives much of its information online and by mobile devices. As attorneys contemplate how best to allocate their limited time, it is important to look at social media and the internet as among the most effective tools to grow their business.

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*Mike C. Gray is a senior account executive at Hellerman Baretz Communications. Andrew K. Ryan is a senior account executive at Hellerman Baretz Communications.*

