

Business & Careers

Social media and law firms in Canada



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Ten years ago, there was no Facebook, no LinkedIn, no Twitter, and very few lawyer blogs.

Today, these three social media platforms — LinkedIn launched in 2003, Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006 — boast a collective 1.6 billion users, and generate an unfathomable volume of content and Internet activity. Yet for all that, a number of Canadian law firms still aren't using these services to their full potential. All midsize and larger law firms have some social media presence but only some Canadian firms have really made the most of these resources.

Here is how Canadian firms are harnessing the various types of social media.

Web logs

Blogs were the first and remain the best content marketing tool on the Internet.

The best law blogs are more than a collection of case law summaries and court analyses. They are focused on clients, written in accessible language, and dedicated to delivering practical insights that will help clients understand the laws that affect them and order their affairs accordingly. Unfortunately, the former type of law firm blog post is still far more common.

Blogs have been used primarily by solo and small-firm lawyers. But midsize and large firms have caught up over the past few years, no firm more swiftly than Stikeman Elliott, which has 11 separate blogs on topics ranging from securities to communications to mining law, according to the lawblogs.ca directory. Coming in second is Fraser Milner, whose eight blogs include entries on data governance law and doing business in Canada. Davis takes the bronze with six blogs. McCarthy Tétrault has four, including one of the few regional blogs to be found in a national firm.

Twitter

As with some blogs, many Twitter feeds are little more than links to a firm's newsletter articles or blog posts, or boasts about lawyers' awards or media appearances. The largest firms are the most predictable and conventional in this regard. But who reads a newspaper that only contains news about what its publishers are doing?

Great law firm Twitter feeds focus on a specific practice or industry area and curate related news and insights from around the Internet, interspersing these updates with an appropriate amount of self-promotion. Not surprisingly, smaller firms (or more focused large-firm practice groups) are more successful at this, since they feel no need to be all things to all people and have fewer partners to fear.

Solid Twitter accounts operated by Canadian law firms include: Ridout & Maybee (especially good at retweeting its lawyers' Twitter dispatches); McInnes Cooper

(strong focus on Atlantic Canada developments); and Field Law (just the right conversational tone). Gowlings' Ad Law feed is a good example of a practice group account that thrives because it can narrow its focus to what clients care about.

Facebook

This has always been the toughest social media platform for law firms to figure out, primarily because most people think of it as a social medium rather than as a business or professional one. Most lawyers on Facebook are there to keep up with their friends from (or keep an eye on their kids in) high school. But Facebook has begun to adapt business-friendly features, and some law firms have noticed.

Facebook has two primary benefits for firms. It can show a more humanized side than the website generally allows, such as showing United Way fundraising photos, charity bike rides, etc. Some firms also use Facebook to help out their clients, identifying their successes and promoting their brands. Secondly, Facebook's "Like" feature is essentially a subscription service to the firm's Facebook updates: when a user (it doesn't need to be anyone's "friend") "likes" your page, that user's news stream automatically includes everything that the firm posts to its Facebook account. And just like that, you have a self-selected addition to a content distribution list that is free to operate and easy to share.

Three good law firm Facebook accounts to study: McCarthy Tétrault makes clever use of the new Timeline feature to include photos of its six Canadian offices in its banner; Boughton Law places job openings on Facebook and makes its lawyers available for Q&A; and Blake Cassels is especially good at showcasing its community and diversity activities on its Facebook page.

LinkedIn

On the surface, LinkedIn would appear to be the most natural fit for law firms. It's a business-focused platform where professionals converge to highlight their accomplishments and connect with others who share their business interests.

But while most of the major Canadian firms have established a presence on LinkedIn (with the surprising exception of a few nationals), they apparently use it primarily to aggregate their lawyers' activity rather than to engage with the job-seeking community. And while many companies use LinkedIn to drive conversation about the client experience, creating discussion boards, polls, and opportunities to engage with senior clients directly, few law firms have followed suit.

LinkedIn has witnessed a dramatic uptake in corporate job postings, including a significant number of in-house counsel positions. But Canadian law firms remain noticeably absent, and those that do post often do not link back to the firm's profile or properly screen potential applicants.

One law firm recently posted seeking a general corporate solicitor with 5 to 12-plus years of experience: junior candidates thought they were inexperienced and senior candidates felt overqualified. The firm was willing to hire at either end of the spec-

trum, but it failed to properly craft the posting or use LinkedIn's tools to assist.

It's interesting to note how many firms are especially strong on one social media platform, but very light on others: no Canadian firm is outstanding on all four systems. This could reflect a decision to go all-in with a particular social media at the expense of others, although it's more likely a result of limited marketing resources and partner trepidation about cannonballing into the social media pool.

Canadian law firms are no longer afraid of social media — the default question is

not "Why are you doing this?" but "Why aren't you doing this?" However, participation alone isn't enough — the early-adopter stage has passed, and the standards for success are higher.

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