

Connecticut Law Tribune

June 20, 2013

 ctlawtribune.com

An ALM Publication

Why Content Marketing Scares Lawyers



Joy Martini

By JOY MARTINI

I recently reviewed a presentation to law firm marketers examining how firms can leverage their brand by hopping on the information highway. This is the topic — and opportunity — du jour, of course. But it's a complex proposition; social media scares lawyers for legitimate and serious reasons.

We can overcome. And, we can leverage. But we need to think through the risks and rewards the way lawyers think about them.

Lawyers are careful. The lawyer favors control above all other things. Control requires a thorough examination of possibilities, precedents and risks. Legal writing, for example, is tedious because it must be. A case analysis grows from a paragraph to the length of an ancient scroll because a lawyer builds positions from the ground up with precise and comprehensive engineering.

All of these qualities seem to run counter to the aggressive social media-teur. For one thing, blogs and tweets demand brevity and punch. And, most importantly, speed. Fresh content is fast content, whether to draw traffic to a site by "newsjacking" or manufacturing news by announcing a successful transaction, court decision or fleshing out a complicated regulatory development.

And what to do about the preponderance of "communities," those vast web-based factions built around interests, industry, any number of affinities? Communities are also scary. Lawyers join lots of LinkedIn groups, but few comment on articles or posts apart from the neutral, "Well done!" And lawyers rarely post their own blog posts or articles to groups because of positioning concerns. If I take this position, I may turn off a prospective client on the other side.

But the fact is, if content is king in this new digital universe, then law firms are already

royal. In some respects, content (words on paper) is really a lawyer's commodity. To be sure, law firms generate massive amounts of content that currently exists in the form of news alerts and press releases, accolade announcements, court decisions, articles and CLE materials. The missing piece here is how to repurpose that content to maximize its value, enrich the firm's name recognition and capitalize on new opportunities.

Here are some suggestions on how to do that by taking the boo factor out of content marketing:

1) Start Small. Create a blog tied to a key practice. Posts don't have to be exhaustive legal briefings. Rather, focus on short posts on hot-button issues, trends or recent developments. Every single day in every state in the union, for every practice known to lawyers, there is something to blog about. Don't say it all, because you can point to white papers, articles, press releases or just encourage phone calls! In blogging, we say: flirt, don't marry. By continuously engaging and addressing topics that concern your clients and targets, you build credibility and position the firm as a thought leader.

2) Link Up. Clients, potential clients and referral sources are on LinkedIn. Everyone is on LinkedIn. As a professional forum for industry professionals to share ideas and network, the site provides the opportunity to establish an attorney as the go-to resource on specific topics. Attorneys should have "expert" level profiles. Firms, too, should have a page — organization pages have a lot of followers and offer a platform to regularly post content and more effectively cross-market. Familiarize yourself with groups, learn what a specific group is interested in, which discussions are most popular and engaging. Join, but comment and post with

care. Best of all, watch who is watching you. It's nosy and entertaining and might give you a reason to call someone.

3) Hello, Hollywood? My Lawyer's Calling. Data shows that audiences spend more time, and click more often, on websites that contain multimedia elements, such as videos, photos and charts. Videos, in particular, are game-changing legal marketing tools. Use videos to engage an audience on timely issues, commercial developments, attorney expertise, even a firm's culture. Lawyers happily maintain control because they can script and practice and edit the video ad infinitum. Viewers are happy because instead of a document jockey, their lawyer is a dynamic person. A note on production: Keep it short. Script it well. Be creative and never use "lawyer speak." Never record a video seated in front of volumes and volumes of F.3d's. And consider outsourcing to professionals. In the end, the investment will be the gift that keeps on giving.

4) Tag, You're It. If you tag it, they really will come. Tagging, how the mysterious elves on a website's back end highlight particular keywords, is an excellent way to maximize reach. By tagging keywords in a blog post, for instance, you tell search engines how to think about content and what matters. Since we want lawyers to maintain the highest spot in the "white space," highlighting relevant terms and keywords enables your content to appear more frequently in online searches. This is a niche specialty and law firms would do well to consult digital marketing experts to ensure that from a technical perspective, content is primed to support the firm's strategic objectives and maintain high organic search rankings.

5) Expand The Circle Of Influence: For every practice area under the sun, there are journalists, bloggers and experts that either

make news or make news happen. These thought leaders already "own" an audience, so get to know them. Help them. The media (social, digital and print alike) all want content. They need content. By serving as a regular, responsive and trusted resource, you can "lease" their space. Large or small, no firm has infinite PR resources to support every practitioner, so this is an area where partners can make a great deal of headway on their own.

6) Orientation Is Everything: Lawyers are smart. People pay lots of money for access to that brain, but they'd really prefer if, outside of legal documents and court appearances, that brain would dumb it down for the rest of us. When we work with lawyers, our gating question is invariably, "Yes, but what does that *mean* to normal people?" In every content marketing push, lawyers need to leap over two hurdles: First, you must focus on business implications, not legal factoids. This requires cutting through the complex clutter to distill the (few) relevant pieces of information. And then communicating that in easy-to-understand language. Second, keep it brief. This violates everything in a lawyer's constitution. But the fact remains, if blog posts were supposed to be voluminous, we'd call them blongs.

7) Release The Captives: Even if a firm is not ready to push content on a regular basis, every firm can get more active in how it uses the content it already creates. Press releases are a good example of a content product that often is held captive in a law firm website. Since a large percentage of firms' visitors are probably law students looking for a job, captive content is a missed opportunity. Distribution services, such as PR Newswire, have excellent and startlingly affordable plans for electronic distribution of media alerts. Not every release will result in an above-the-fold feature in *The New York Times*, but there are other worthy results. Electronic distribution will have a huge impact on a firm's web presence, elevate the firm's name recognition and its search ranking.

8) Syndicate: When we talk about syndication in content marketing, we mean, simply, getting the most mileage out of each and every effort. Historically, law firms are infamous "one-hit wonders." Associates will toil and partners will

feverishly polish an alert to clients that analyzes some important thing — say, for instance, a hot decision out of Delaware Chancery Court. The alert will go to a specific mailing list of clients/interested parties. Maybe the partner will share the alert with others, suggesting they send it out to their contacts. It's an onerous process that is extremely inward-looking, inefficient and labor-intensive. But the product is probably really smart and there may be a whole universe of ideal target clients and opinion leaders who should also know about this decision. What's a lawyer to do? Syndicate. Send out the release via PR Newswire's WebMax service. Put it on the firm's homepage. Briefly describe the issue and link to the alert in a blog post. Push it to relevant LinkedIn groups. Tweet, if you tweet. Share the alert with bloggers and journalists and tell them why it matters. Host a webinar — promoted through social media, or directly to firm contacts. If it's a bet-the-company issue, consider producing a one-minute video that captures the most relevant points. Attorneys have so many tools to make your work work for you. So use them.

9) Take Comfortable Positions: Every lawyer embarking on a blog or any other form of fast-paced, short-length content has the same anxieties. All of them can be addressed. It's this simple: If disagreement is likely — even possible — and it scares you, don't open the door. Given that most firms will happily take any side in a juicy matter, as you analyze an issue or decision, draft from the perspective of the general audience. Platitudes are your friend. It is perfectly acceptable and, indeed, encouraged, to state, "Recent developments at the NYC Department of Buildings will have a significant impact on the many stakeholders in the construction process — from architects and engineers, to developers, owners and tenants..." The blog is a tool to tackle timely information; it doesn't have to be about taking sides. That said, controversy does make news. If you don't foresee a potential conflict and you are comfortable with your position, by all means, take it and stake it.

10) Analyze This: Every investment — time and dollars — should be measured. It's not always possible to calculate an absolute

return in actual fee receipts. But value rests in other places too. Mid-sized firms representing pretty significant companies often wrestle with name recognition: the chorus includes, "No general counsel will hire a firm he's never heard of," or, "No one second-guesses hiring the overpriced behemoth. If they lose, anyone would lose. If we lose, it's because we weren't the overpriced behemoth." To the extent that content marketing renders a lawyer the definitive resource in a particular area, content marketing is a credible way to validate the retention. Look at customized traffic reports on a regular basis. Active content marketing will cause a dramatic shift in web traffic from prospective hires to prospective clients. Study how your web visitors find you, where they go, how long they stay and tailor your marketing efforts accordingly. If biographies are hot, upgrade them with fresh prose and a smart video. If a blog post about an alert generates significant traffic to a white paper and then a practice area, you're on to something powerful. Host a webinar post haste. Take note of surprises. Is there traffic from a particular region? Why? Is there something to mine there? Let the data guide you. It's powerful. And it will allay all kinds of fears about marketing expenses, value and time.

So here's the net-net. The competition for clients has never been more fierce. Differentiation is everything. The question is why you and not your most able competitor? Content marketing is a substantive and affordable way to answer that question. And the real work is already done. You have the car. Just gas it up, drive at a comfortable pace and get on the highway. •

Joy Martini is the founding partner of Martini Consulting, a boutique legal marketing and communications firm.

