

Catching the blog wave

Law Firms See Benefits In A Growing Medium

By Joseph Bednar

More than 30,000 new blogs are launched on the Internet every day. A few of these are known as 'blawgs,' launched by law firms to share information with their clients and increase their visibility. The public is taking notice.

When some people hear the word blog, they might think of a teenager's angst-ridden journal, a hobbyist's obsessive chronicle of his activities, or a mountain of baby pictures shared online.

They might not think of a law firm.

That's changing, however, as businesses of all kinds are discovering how to make this new, interactive medium work for them. And law firms are leading the way, learning how to showcase the online self-publishing wave to spotlight their expertise, share information, and better serve clients.

"I know many long-time clients are readers," said Hyman Darling, an attorney with Springfield-based Bacon & Wilson, P.C., which recently launched a pair of blogs, one dealing with estate planning issues and the other with employment law. "And it's a way to treat our old clients like new clients, giving them important information."

Indeed, some recent entries at Estate Planning Bits (www.bwlaw.blogs.com/estate_planning_bits), overseen by Darling, answer questions such as, "What are trustees, and what



Attorneys Paul Rothschild (left) and Hyman Darling believe their recently launched blogs will increase Bacon & Wilson's profile in the fields of employment law and estate planning.

do they do?" and "What is a power of attorney, and why should I have one?" Its sister blog, Employment Law Bits (www.bwlaw.blogs.com/employment_law_bits), overseen by attorney Paul Rothschild, recently delved into issues such as discrimination, sexual harassment, and the disparity in pay between men and women.

Some might wonder why a blog is necessary at all, since many law firm Web sites already post articles such as these? The answers are varied – and may be surprising to business people who haven't paid much attention to the Internet lately.

The Next Wave

When the initial wave of businesses launched Web sites during the mid-1990s, many companies were reluctant to do so, preferring to observe how that trend would play out. But today, the vast majority of businesses have a Web presence.

The same scenario seems to be playing out with blogs, which have become a ubiquitous communication tool, emerging during the 2004 presidential campaign as the source of information and online debate for many Americans. Some 10 million blogs are currently online – up from 100,000 two years ago – with U.S. readership estimated at around 35 million. As a result, blog proponents say it would be a mistake for businesses – and law firms in particular – to wait too long to take advantage of this opportunity.

"Blogging is really in its infancy, and a lot of people are waiting to see what happens," said Karen Markham, director of administration at Robinson Donovan, another Springfield-based law firm planning to enter the blogging world. "Instead of waiting to see what this can do for us, I think we have to ask, 'what can we do with this?'"

Nationwide, so many law

firms are entering this new medium – more than 1,000 so far – that law blogs even have their own cheeky slang name: "blawgs," a term coined by California attorney Denise Howell, whose Bag and Baggage site (www.bgbg.blogspot.com) is one of the pioneering legal blogs, and still among the most influential.

"In addition to encouraging media and industry connections that might be otherwise impossible to come by," she writes, "a blawg gives you the chance to demonstrate day after day to colleagues, clients, and potential clients that you know what you're talking about, and you're someone they could see themselves working with when the need arises.

"There's an equal opportunity to come across as a blithering idiot," Howell concedes, "but I sure don't see much of that when I cruise through the blawgs of my colleagues."

The bloggers at Bacon & Wilson clearly had Howell's philosophy in mind when they launched Employment Law Bits and Estate Planning Bits.

But creating a blog and updating it at least every other day, as Bacon & Wilson does, encourages people to make regular visits to the firm's Web site. A comment feature encourages feedback, which in turn might spur business for the firm. In short, a blog does not replace a firm's Web site, but complements it.

"A blog is a quick and easy way to get our messages out to the public," Rothschild said. "It's directed at the general public, not lawyers. The purpose is to get out there with a frequently updated source of information."

There is another benefit of repeat clicks: a firm's position on keyword searches. Because blogs receive so much repeat traffic,

they are starting to rank ahead of static sites on searches using *Google*, *Yahoo!*, and other search engines – which, in turn, will drive even more traffic to a popular site.

Legal Concerns

Markham sees clear benefits in blogging, as long as certain obstacles can be overcome.

“We don’t want our Web site to be the typical law site, so we’re looking at innovative ways of getting traffic to the site and getting people interested in what we do,” she said. “Blogging seems to be a good way of doing some of the things we do, like client alerts,” which are typically communicated via E-mail or mailed letters.

“But the tricky thing in legal blogging is, you have to be careful expressing an opinion,” she added. “You have to be clear that this is general information, not specific legal advice.”

In addition, operating a blog requires daily diligence by a law firm in monitoring comment threads for questionable content.

“You need to be responsive to what people write,” Markham said. “You might have people coming to the site and writing things that are misleading or inappropriate. There are a lot of legal issues.”

That diligence extends to actu-

ally posting regular content, she added. Blogs that don’t update constantly and engage readers run the risk of becoming static and irrelevant – and less-frequently visited.

“That wouldn’t be a good use of the site at all,” she said. “It’s one thing to read a static article,

“In our profession, there is always change. Laws are changing almost daily. A blog gives us the chance to collect that information, synthesize it, and get it out to the public.”

and another to interact with readers. People are more likely to ask questions on a blog than to pick up a phone and call the firm. People who are looking for basic information don’t want to have to pay an attorney for it.”

Managed correctly, Howell believes, a blawg can perform the job of a 20-person public relations staff in the way it keeps the firm visible and relevant. Meanwhile, regularly reading other blogs can serve as an effective professional development tool.

“I’ve found blogs to be incomparably more effective at keeping me up to speed on developments touching on my practice than the

combination of newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and events which used to serve this function for me on their own,” she writes.

“I used to sift through a mish-mash of paper and online resources to make sure I knew quickly about developments that might affect my clients or my

practice. I still check those things, but now they take a back seat to reading what some knowledgeable blogger already has written up.”

Issues That Matter

In the end, it all comes down to what a firm is offering its readership.

“The key is what kind of information you provide,” Markham said. “It might take some time, but if you do it right, you can be visible in an area of expertise and become known for that.”

Rothschild and Darling say Bacon & Wilson might eventually expand its blogs beyond estate

planning and employment law. For now, the blogs keep people aware of issues that may not be covered elsewhere.

The Terri Schiavo case is a good example, Darling said. During the last days of Schiavo’s life, when her family fought over her feeding tube, law firms saw a significant upswing in older Americans wanting to establish health care proxies to set down their end-of-life decisions.

“Those are still important issues to consider,” even though the case is well out of the spotlight, Darling said. A blog can remind people of the need to make such decisions early, and can position a firm in readers’ minds as “the people who really know what the law is and how it affects them.”

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That’s one of the reasons Robinson Donovan is among the firms looking to get in on this initial wave.

“If you’re in there early,” Markham said, “you become known pretty quickly as the guys who are responding to readers, the people who know what they’re talking about.” ❖