

THE LAWYERS WEEKLY

The New Rules for Blogs and Websites



ALLAN
BONNER

On 60 Minutes the other day, I heard a turn of a phrase that marked a new era. The TV documentary was a profile of prominent U.S. cable news journalist Keith Olbermann. At one point he related a story of being awakened by a friend's phone call that alerted him that a major news story had just broken. The journalist matter-of-factly said, "I got up and turned on the computer to see what was happening."

Just a few years ago he might have said that he turned on CNN. Decades before, it might have been broadcast TV. Before TV it would have been turning on the radio or snapping up a special edition of the newspaper.

But now it's the web, and I want to know what this means for the marketing of professional services.

I'm always determined to see new developments through past prisms. So, a web page is a law firm's new brochure. It's also an individual lawyer's resume.

Facebook is the new walk around lunch at a downtown private club or drinks at the tennis or golf club. A blog (some of which look like web pages) is the new phone call with a potential client, news media exposure and business card being passed from one happy client to someone who might need your services.

That's what's the same. But there's also lots that's different. The main difference is that the communication is now instantly two-way. It's a conversation. Here are new the rules:

Etiquette

Law societies would be pleased. Internet etiquette forbids overt touting and self-promotion. The trick is to say something of real use and do it quickly. Don't waste people's time. Tell them in plain language why this piece of communication is useful to them right now. This applies to all web communication, but especially blogs and emails.

Hyperlinks allow you to send direct links to stories about you in the media or websites. The link must be to the exact page for speed and for the credibility that third party endorsement brings.

Blogs

There's new architecture that allows you to post text, audio and video clips. So, if you have video of a recent speech or media appearance, post it, with some background text.

The blog must be interactive, allowing comments. It must have new posts regularly. One way around having to post daily is to have undated threads or topics that are of interest at any time.

Blogs are a way of instigating conversations. People are most likely to do business with someone they know and trust. Some bloggers can set agendas and uncover news stories and new angles, making them authoritative to clients. Some bloggers are ahead of mainstream media; most are just a few hours behind.

If you are going to allow comments, you must vet them because blogging is publishing and you may be responsible for libelous content. Be careful, there are "trolls" out there who get their kicks out of name calling and bombastic comments. Be careful of annoying too many people because they can go on lawyer rating sites and damage your reputation anonymously.

Websites

Don't worry if the new brochure has a typo, or if you need to add something or delete the former partner who bolted to her own firm. Websites can be living documents if you have someone handy who knows the lingo.

In ancient times we wrote more economically for the web. We used splashy graphics, music, sounds and animation on home pages. This is all a waste of time now. Web users want what they want instantly. Worse, these gimmicks don't get noticed by Google searches. You must have the key words of what you and your firm do on the splash page so that potential clients who are searching for your kind of service find you on one of the first few pages that Google throws their way.

Navigation of websites refers to how easy it is to get from one spot to another and find what you're looking for. You want smooth sailing.

In practice

When there's a court case, recall, class action, CSR, or ethical issues then there's a web or blog conversation going on, whether you know it or not. The news story about this event disappears, but the blog stays forever. Killing a news story with libel chill isn't too hard. Getting that same story off the media outlet's website is harder. Getting it off a lobby group's site is harder still, and getting it off blogs and chat rooms is nearly impossible. How you manage the full spectrum of coverage for a client is going to be a challenge in the future.

Google search

Are you dying to have your firm, service or even name come up on the first page of a Google search for what you do? Many people are and nobody's entirely sure how to do it. Google is pretty tight-lipped about how it judges who gets on the first few pages, but what follows is some

good guessing.

Google may just be rating popularity. It may judge popularity by the number of people who visit you or hit on your site. Some people have tried repeatedly visiting their own site, but Google can detect that. Google is also measuring the number of links or referrals. So, if lots of sites have hyperlinks to your site or blog, and you have lots of hyperlinks to others, then Google counts the traffic in and out as a plus.

Google may also cause you to pop up in part on the timeliness of the references on your site and blog. So, names, issues and places in the news that you reference the day they are topical will make you a destination when people Google those key words.

Some advocate buying space on the top few pages, but the jury is out on whether that works or is worth the cost.

Repeat business

You want people coming back to your blog for more. Naturally you need new and interesting information, but you also need to let the world know you're updating. Feedburner and Feedblitz are RSS — Really Simple Syndication services. They allow people to tag your site, which then generates an e-mail telling recipients that you've posted something new.

Rankings are based on the number of readers, how often they read, how many people link, how long they stay, how many pages they read and whether they come back. Technorati is among the best ranking services.

Biggest impact:

For all the talk about how blogs and the web are revolutionizing business, it's still sports, the military and entertainment that dominate the new ether. There are huge implications for military operations and democracy when tens of thousands of soldiers are anonymously blogging their version of the truth to the world.

Success story

Edmonton lawyer Ken Chapman (www.ken-chapman.blogspot.com) has only been blogging for about a year and a half, but he's already ranked 21st in traffic among Canadian political bloggers. This is doubly astounding when you consider that most bloggers are also journalists and have another outlet for their research and opinions. Ken is also more of the manual typewriter generation, but has caught on to these new ways of communicating so well, he turned out to be among the best sources I could find for this column.

There's hope for us all.

Dr. Allan Bonner coaches leaders from his base in Toronto. He is the author of several business books on communication and crisis management. He has worked with several of Canada's largest law firms.