

Social Networking – Web 2.0

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It's almost impossible to go anywhere, today, where you don't find yourself surrounded by social networking. For young people, especially, the mobile phone (PDA) is a lifeline – kids are in continuous contact with their friends, and, because the seemingly sudden availability of this technology occurred when they were very young, in their mind, they can't imagine a world without this constant social interaction. What comes so naturally to them can be a struggle for the older generation, but professionals are beginning to recognize the benefits such technology can bring to their business, and slowly but surely, it is being adopted even by law firms.

The introduction of Web 2.0 has opened this type of instant, two-way communication to the Internet. It has already changed the ways in which we communicate and interact with one another, but, in my view, we are just at the beginning of where this technology could potentially lead us. The following is a high-level overview of where we are today with social networking, using the tools provided by Web 2.0.

Today, social networking falls into four categories:

- 1) Blogs
- 2) Wikis
- 3) Social Networking
- 4) Professional Networking

Combining these provides a communication kit that enables anyone to interact with as many people as they desire, anywhere and at any time. The effectiveness of these tools should not be underestimated, as they can disseminate and collect information, affecting viewpoints and actions of huge numbers of people. The tools used in the campaigns of our recent presidential nominees are a great example.

So, what is a Blog? "Blog" is short for "web log," a website where one can easily publish information on an ongoing basis. In return, anyone who has access to the blog can add his or her own thoughts, which, in turn, can be read and commented upon by other viewers. There are millions of blogs on the Web today, in all shapes and sizes – and there are no rules. Since the introduction of blogs in 1999, they have reshaped the ways that we think about the Web, and have given millions of people a very easy way to publish and exchange their views and ideas.

Although blogs have been around for several years, the technology is still new to professional firms. Today, 25% of the top 200 law firms use blogs to communicate with current and potential clients, and the rate of adoption is steadily increasing.

Wikis, on the other hand, have been used by law firms for some time, and have been one of their most popular applications. "Wiki" is a Hawaiian word meaning "fast," appropriate considering the speed with which law firms spotted the potential of its concept, and applied it to their businesses. Since the technology was introduced in 1994 by Ward Cunningham and Bo Leuf, law firms have used them to disseminate and collect information around their firms.

A Wiki is a collaborative website that can be used for a variety of tasks, but for law firms, wikis are ideal for keeping an internal knowledge base, and are a simple way to manage their websites. The key, again, to this software is the ability, not only to look up information, but to add information as well. Simplicity of use is also relevant here, but with this factor comes the potential for the *quantity* of information to drown out its *quality*.

Microsoft 'Sharepoint' is the most popular application used to create wikis, and comes complete with a wide range of tools, including RSS and web parts. These simplify the installation and start up process. Web-parts enable data to be shared within the firm and also on the firm's website.

Social networking took on a completely new face with the introduction of Web 2.0, and you probably will not be surprised to hear the names of the leaders in this field: "Twitter," "Facebook" and "Bebo." These sites may not be household names quite yet, but for those under 25 years old, they are some of the most popular tools for communicating with friends and social groups. These Web-based services focus on building online communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. The sites also offer to deliver information directly via email, so users don't even have to log on to be kept up to date. To give an idea of the volume of use for these sites, Twitter alone is reported to have over three million accounts!

Professional networking includes similar web-based services. The market leader in this group is "Linked-In," with over 25 million members. In second place is "Biznik," and in third, "Professional on the Web." I have heard Linked-In described as the "Facebook for adults with jobs," which, although not strictly accurate, is amusing. The goal behind posting information on one or more of these networking sites is to increase one's visibility, connectivity, Google PageRank, and general search engine results. As a member one is also able to research companies and track startups, which can be very useful.

Large numbers of attorneys are now using these services to post their expertise in order to attract new clients, and, in some cases, new employers. The firm website and Martindale Hubbell are no longer the main resources for finding an attorney, and as most professional networking services are free, their use is rapidly increasing. "Six degrees of separation" is now reputed to be down to five degrees, due to the introduction of these networking tools. It's amazing to think that within five contacts you are connected with everyone in the world! The question for professionals today is not whether to join one of these networks, it's why haven't you.

In addition to the above categories, if you add messaging tools such as "Google Talk," "MSN Live Messenger" and "AOL Instant Messenger (AIM)" there are even more ways to communicate directly and instantaneously with others. With these tools one has the ability to instantly exchange, not only text, but also files, live video, and other types of information. Some attorneys see the advantages of obtaining instant answers from their colleagues, and use these tools almost as much as email – ideal when in a meeting or talking to clients (*I use 'Windows Live Messenger' to communicate with my team members, and now wonder how I ever managed without it*). All of this software works seamlessly on mobile phones (PDA) so you can keep in touch while on the move. Blackberry identified the potential of instant messaging, and introduced the Blackberry PIN to enable Blackberry users to communicate directly with each other in a similar way.

Social networking, therefore, looks as if it is here to stay, and there's no telling how and where it might evolve next. There is no doubt that web 2.0 has moved the goal posts for us all. What will Web 3.0 bring?