

Build Your Own Blog

By J. Craig Williams

Who: You. **What:** A weblog (a.k.a. blog, blawg). **Where:** Any computer. **How:** Surf, pick, write. **When:** Available to you 24/7. **Why:** "He writes this stuff to get it out of his system."

There you have it: a newspaper "lead" on how to write a blog. Not quite what you were looking for, though, largely because the internet is quite different than a newspaper or other printed media. It takes a little more than those six bullet points. So, if you've gotten past the "what is a blog?" stage and are considering writing one, here's the skinny.

1. Get The Lay Of The Land

Before you get started, it's helpful to know what's already out there. There are several great resources that point you to what lawyers are already writing on the internet. There's the Daily Whirl, at www.dailywhirl.com or at www.dailyrotation.com.

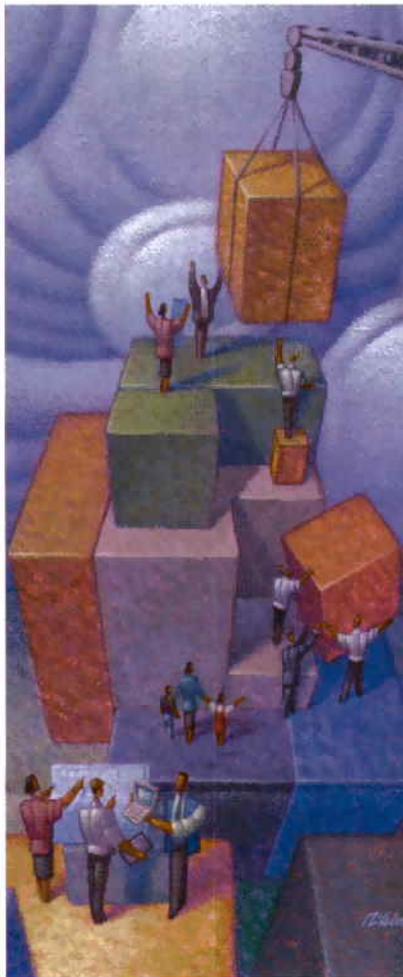
You can also turn to Bag and Baggage at <http://bgbg.blogspot.com>, which has probably one of the most extensive blogrolls (list of other lawyers' blogs) available. You can point your mouse to law blogs at Ring Surf, www.ringsurf.com/netring?action=info&ring=Lawblogs that lists many legal blogs.

Finally, give a look at www.Blawg.org for a host of links to lawyers' musings on the web.

Denise Howell, the author of Bag and Baggage (<http://bgbg.blogspot.com/>), coined the term "blawg," combining the terms "law" and "blog" to distinguish what lawyers write from the rest of the blogosphere.

We write differently than most bloggers, and even within the law, lawyers write about many different things. A good number of law bloggers are, not surprisingly, law students, and there are other computer-savvy lawyers who write about things other than the law. There are no limits.

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2. Pick A General Subject Area

Now that you know what lawyers are writing, you may have some ideas on what you'd like to write about. I suggest Mark Twain's advice, "Write about what you know."

In other words, give some thought to your favorite practice area. It's the one thing you know best, are most interested in and can already speak authoritatively on.

Lawyer specialties may provide some guidance, too. Family law, criminal law, intellectual property such as patents, trademarks, copyrights, or environmental law (be careful there, those are some of the things I write about), securities, immigration, even insurance and personal injury may provide some valuable fod-

der for your blog.

But be careful. Bruce MacEwen, who writes Adam Smith, Esq. (www.adamsmithesq.com/blog/) cautions, "Without question, the hardest part of launching a blog is deciding what you want to write about. Too broad ("IT in law firms") and you'll never make an intellectual dent in your subject. Too narrow ("Spam Filters") and you'll never command an audience.

You want a topic that: a) hasn't been swarmed all over by other bloggers; b) is something you actually know something about; and c) most important, that you have passion for.

Most lawyers write for one or many of several reasons, and although one of the main ones is marketing, MacEwen is right — passion brings readers. If you're trying to market your practice or establish yourself as an expert in a particular area, choose your practice area. That's where your passion already lies. Once you know what you want to write, you need to get published.

3. Find a Platform

Depending on what you're trying to accomplish, give serious consideration to where you want to publish. There are several ready-made platforms that you can use, such as Typepad (www.typepad.com), Blogger (www.blogger.com) and Radio Userland (<http://radio.userland.com>). You can even publish a photoblog (www.textamerica.com) right from your phone, including text.

But if you are trying to market your practice and want to attract traffic to your firm's website, then consider creating your own and linking it directly to your website. Your MIS or IT folks can help out. If you're like me when I got started, you'll need to hire a programmer to develop your site, giving you complete control.

If you'd like an off-the-shelf, ready-made blog, you can visit Kevin O'Keefe's Lexblog site, www.lexblog.com. There's a bit of a debate on whether you should use a prepackaged product or create your own. Professional ethics don't yet address that point, but the blogosphere talks about it. Be your own judge.

4. Surf, Surf, Surf and Read, Read, Read

Now that you're up and running, you need material. You already know that the internet is practically unlimited, but there are some typical sources for legal material. FindLaw, Lexis and CNN will get you started. Try a search for legal blogs, and you're off to the races. Read newspapers, slip opinions and everything you do now.

The one unique difference between a blog and a newspaper — or even this magazine — is a set

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I had my topic: The economics of law firms. I was an econ major undergrad and have always been passionate about the business side of firms, so it came naturally, and as luck would have it, no one else yet had "owned" the space.

Now I faced the existential question: Would I be any good? Would I have anything original to say? Where would I find the time? To safeguard my self-esteem, I decided the prudent way to begin would be in private (think theatrical try-outs on the road). I started my blog in stealth mode, telling no one but my wife, posting entries tentatively.

As I became comfortable and found my "voice," blogging became a welcome part of the week's flow of activities, and I began enjoying the expressive outlet. Something else happened: I became more knowledgeable about the business of law firms, discovered I had strong opinions, and took pleasure in the discipline of reading widely, thinking critically, and attempting to state my view in an engaging fashion. Last spring I went public with "Adam Smith, Esq." www.AdamSmithEsq.com/blog, named in honor of the 18th-century Scottish economist who is the godfather of capitalism. I cover leadership, compensation, strategy, finance, globalization, marketing, IT, etc.

I e-mailed other legal bloggers inviting them to take a look, and in no time they provided cross-links. My site traffic started to climb, to nearly 20,000 visits a month.

What, then, have I gotten out of it? Isn't it all just an intellectual stretching exercise, one in which I will never know or hear from 99 percent of my readers? I think not. I have made valuable connections in the real world.

For example, I heard from associate professor William Henderson, of the Indiana University School of Law at Bloomington, and we are now collaborating on an ambitious research project into the characteristics and evolution of the business of large law firms. I will guest lecture in his course on "Law Firms as Business Organizations" this year.

The site was featured in *The Wall Street Journal* and I'm going to this year's "Knowledge Counsel Forum" in New York as blogger-in-residence. I get a steady flow of e-mail from managing partners, executive directors, lawyers, heads of IT and finance, professors, students, consultants and others, kicking off intriguing conversations.

Back when the internet was young, a commonplace observation was that it would enable "everyone to be a publisher." As fast as you can say AOL or Yahoo, that vision was aborted.

But blogs have reinvented the same promise in an unforeseen and unintended format. Not the one-way, mass-distribution, take-it-or-leave-it Gutenberg model. But the two-way, boutique publishing, conversationally open-ended Movable Type model. **LTN**



Law.com Blog Network

ALM has launched its new Law.com Blog Network, showcasing independent legal blogs, on legal topics ranging from constitutional law and business litigation to solo practice to law technology. It can be accessed by visiting www.law.com, or <http://blogs.law.com>. The Network includes a daily Legal Blog Watch, highlighting postings, news and discussions across the following affiliated blogs:

- "The Volokh Conspiracy" (<http://volokh.com>), founded by UCLA law professor Eugene Volokh and co-authored by 14 co-bloggers (mostly fellow law professors). Volokh teaches First Amendment law, copyright law, and firearms regulation policy.
- "May It Please the Court" (www.mayitpleasethecourt.net) by J. Craig Williams. Before founding WLF/The Williams Law Firm and beginning his career as a business litigator, Williams was a broadcaster and a journalist.
- "My Shingle" (<http://myshingle.com>) by solo practitioner Carolyn Elefant, created to help small firm lawyers trade advice and accomplishments.
- "I/P Updates" (www.ip-updates.com) by Bill Heinze, a former Investigative Attorney for the U.S. International Trade Commission and practicing intellectual property attorney.
- "Jottings by an Employer's Lawyer" (<http://employerslawyer.blogspot.com>) by Michael Fox, a litigator and specialist in labor and employment law.
- "Crime & Federalism" (<http://federalism.typepad.com>) by Michael Cernovich, a third-year law student at Pepperdine University.
- "The [non]billable hour" (<http://thenonbillablehour.typepad.com>) by Matt Homann, a practicing attorney, mediator, and adjunct professor at Washington University Law School in St. Louis, Mo.
- A new blog, "The Common Scold," by ALM's Monica Bay, a member of the California bar, editor in chief of *Law Technology News*, and editorial director of *Law Firm Inc.* and *Small Firm Business* magazines. (See page 24).
- The "Legal Blog Watch," by Lisa Stone, a journalist and blogger whose work has appeared in *The New York Times* and other publications.

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of active links that take your readers away from your blog post. Think of a blog as a newspaper article on steroids. The links add dimension to your writing, and act like footnotes that open new windows to other parts of the web — parts that you choose when you establish the link.

5. Post Frequently and Get Linked

There's so much material that it may be hard to pick one topic. If you post blog entries frequently, then you'll have plenty of time to write about everything. Here's the big tip that will get you noticed on the web: search engines love frequent change. Write often and they will find you. Search engines also look for a lot of links. So, use your blogroll to link to others you like, and ask other bloggers to link to you.

6. Link To Others and Be Brief

If you want to get others to link to your blog (the key to obtaining high search engine position), then you need to link to others. That's the easy part. Getting others to link to you is a little more difficult. Observes Eugene Volokh, the author of the Volokh Conspiracy (<http://volokh.com>): "When you're trying to get people to link to you, pitch the post, not the blog — tell people about a particularly interesting post on your blog, rather than just inviting them to visit your blog periodically. They're probably far too busy to start visiting still more blogs." But that's not all, Volokh says.

"Also, when you pitch the post, send the permalink — the specific URL for the post — and the full text of the post. This makes it much easier for them to read, and to excerpt and link to if they choose to do that."

Apart from the flashiness of links, writing is still words on the page. Be snappy, interesting, spelled right and grammatically correct. You likely write frequently as part of your practice, and if you do, you're a step ahead of the game. Remember though, that the internet is about speed. Be brief and be noticed.

One blogger posted a great essay here: www.alistapart.com/articles/writeliving, expanding on these 10 points:

- Write for a reason.
- Write often.
- Write tight.
- Make good friends.
- Find good enemies.
- Let the story unfold.
- Stand up, speak out.
- Be sexy.
- Use your archives.
- Relax!

That's the key. Writing should be enjoyable. If you like to write, know what you're writing about and provide interesting links to your readers, you'll develop a following. Next thing you know, you'll be famous. **LTN**