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Lawyers turn to blogs, podcasts and RSS feeds to generate business

By Tony Wright

Just five years ago, if your firm didn't have a website you risked lagging behind your competitors as they sprinted to keep pace with the ever-changing, increasingly tech-savvy world around them.

Nowadays, if you don't add an RSS feed or podcast to your website, the site — and you — will soon be considered a dinosaur.

Welcome to the latest in law-firm marketing, where podcasts, RSS feeds, news aggregators and blogs are all the rage.

Following is a lowdown on the new wave of technology being used in legal marketing. So grab your iPod, download an aggregator and sail away into the blogosphere!

Blog on

The blog. It sounds like a fungus that grows and spreads like dandelions blanketing a field.

And depending on who you ask, some would agree that the blog, or weblog, has done just that — taken over the Internet, with numbers estimated in the tens of millions.

In the end, the blog is just a glorified journal that is supposed to be updated regularly and should reflect its author's voice and expertise.

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Oh yeah, and it's supposed to be interesting.

For the small firm or solo lawyer, the blog has become a vital marketing tool, whereby attorneys, through their websites, attract readers, including other lawyers interested in the topic or issue being written about or potential clients who may be seeking advice about the attorney's practice area.

The hope is that the attorneys will send referral business and the general public interested in the subject will convert to paying clients.

Rockport solo Robert J. Ambrogi maintains two blogs — one about media law, his area of expertise, and the other which tracks interesting law-related websites.

"[The blogs] certainly have been a source of referrals for my business," explains Ambrogi, who consults on media-related issues.

But what's exciting today about the blog is the way it makes its way to one's desktop or laptop.

Pull, don't push

Enter the RSS feed, which is revolutionizing the way law firms get their messages out to anyone who wants them — which is key, according to marketing professionals.

Unlike the "push" concept whereby online marketing and advertising information shows up on your desktop in the form of pop-up ads and similarly annoying advertisements, the trend is toward the "pull" concept of marketing.

RSS syndication technology accomplishes the "pull" by allowing computer users to decide what information they're interested in and from which sources they'd like to receive it.

RSS is an acronym for "really simple syndication" or "rich site summary."

According to Scott R. Hess, co-founder of Legal Talk Network (www.legaltalknetwork.com), RSS is a program, a file format, just as HTML is a file format. It uses a specific scripting language, known as XML, to categorize online content in an organized way.

In the simplest terms, say an attorney has been diligently updating his blog on his website, which relates to his divorce and family law practice.

Historically that blog would have been considered "passive" in the marketing world, meaning that a potential client would have to navigate to the attorney's website before ever finding his blog, and return to the site every time he wanted to read it.

But with RSS syndication, the attorney can make his blog "active."

"The idea is like an old [Associated Press] wire. It's sending the news to you. So if someone comes to my blog and they like it, they click on my RSS button and it loads my feed into their reader," explains Ambrogi, referring to what's called a "news aggregator" or "news reader," which displays online content on one's desktop.

Conversely, attorneys can integrate various other RSS feeds into their own site, thereby adding value to Internet users who surf by, giving them less of a reason to leave the site and go elsewhere for legal news and information.

For example, law.com allows users to integrate its RSS feed into their own site.

And for a nominal fee and with no technical knowledge necessary, attorneys can also subscribe to

an RSS publishing service.

Upon posting your blog onto the service, the technology carries your message out into the ether known as the "blogosphere." It gets picked up by the news aggregators, which search the web for keywords in blogs entered by users.

The result of all of this is a desktop feature for computer users with a steady flow of fresh online content, customized by the user based on personal interest.

The alternative is that the user log into each site or blog individually to get the content they're looking for — an arduous task that busy professionals don't have time to undertake.

Law firm WilmerHale seems to be leading the pack when it comes to using RSS feeds.

According to website strategy manager Nancy Kostakos, the firm currently has 19 RSS feeds on its site on practice areas ranging from anti-trust to real estate and everything in between.

"We're making sure that we're putting value-added content out there for our clients," explains Kostakos, who says the technology allows her and her firm, in a general sense, to review who's reading the feeds and how often they're looking.

"It's just another way to make our content more available to our client base, which tends to be more tech-savvy [than some]," she adds.

Podcasting

But RSS feeds can carry and deliver more than just blogs to end users. The latest and greatest way for firms to get their soft-sell message out to the public, business and the legal community is via the "podcast."

A podcast, at least in the legal marketing world, is nothing more than an audio stream, played either directly through one's computer or downloaded into a portable device like an iPod.

No one's suggesting that the concept of streaming audio on the Internet is a new concept; it's the method of delivery — the RSS feed — that is ushering it into its online marketing heyday.

Hess explains the genesis of how podcasts made their way into RSS feeds.

He says that as RSS feeds and news aggregators began catching on, someone thought it would be interesting to add an audio file, known as an MP3, to the feed as an attachment.

When the news aggregator pulled in the blog or other written information, it also pulled in the audio file.

"I-Tunes saw the audio feed and played it," says Hess.

Since then, the distribution of audio content via RSS feeds is catching on. The question is, how quick is the legal community to adopt new technologies?

Molly Nunes, a public relations manager at WilmerHale's Boston office, says that in terms of the "innovation adoption curve," law firms tend to lag behind other industries.

But Lu Ann Reeb, co-founder of Legal Talk Network, disagrees.

She and Hess produce high-quality, legal talk-radio — except that it's not on the radio.

Listeners can go to the company's website, www.legaltalknetwork.com, and listen, or by searching

for podcasts at any one of a number of websites they will find the shows, which they can download.

Reeb produces an audio show for Ambrogi called "Coast to Coast," which can be viewed on the site or picked up by a news aggregator.

For example, Internet users can go to www.podcasts.yahoo.com, type in the word "legal," and up pops multiple podcast options containing the search word, including productions from the Legal Talk Network.

From there, users can either listen or subscribe so that they automatically receive feeds on their desktop when new content is published.

Of course, stresses Reeb, lawyers not only want their podcasts and blogs to end up on someone's RSS feed, they want them to stay there. That means the content must be fresh, interesting and well-produced.

Garbage in, garbage out, says Reeb, who produces a show for Salem attorney Alan S. Pierce, among many others.

Pierce, who does a talk show about workers' compensation and issues surrounding the practice area, insists his goal when he began recording his shows wasn't to market his practice.

"Workers' comp is very much state-specific, so having a potential audience in 49 other states means nothing in terms of my business," says Pierce. "I can't say that I've picked up business, but if that becomes a byproduct then that's OK," he adds, noting that his shows — or "listens," as he prefers to call them — have attracted more than 6,000 web hits since last July.

Video v. audio

Video, say marketing and broadcast professionals, is the next step, and some firms are already using video to attract business. But the video RSS feed has yet to make its way into the legal world.

Reeb says that video is a lot more labor-intensive in terms of production than is audio.

"The file size quadruples," she says, which would drastically increase the time it takes to download or to receive video via RSS feeds.

"Right now, video is more for entertainment but it'll get there. In the legal world, audio is more popular, and I think a lot of lawyers have the toys to download and subscribe to audio [feeds]," she says, referring again to the idea of users "pulling in" content they want.

Video, when it comes to law firm marketing, still lives in the world of "push" marketing.

One law firm, Day, Berry & Howard, has taken the plunge, at least on its website www.dbh.com. A slide-show-type video produced by Wellesley-based Legal Insight Media is featured on the firm's website and can be downloaded into handheld devices.

Roberta Montafia, the firm's chief marketing officer, explains that the video, called a TrueView, uses still photos of females who work at the firm with background music and voiceover audio of the women talking about their experiences at Day, Berry & Howard.

The goal is to show potential clients and employees the firm's commitment to a diverse workforce.

Experts say video, which makes for a compelling message, is an idea whose time will come.

But the flavor of the month is the method of delivery as opposed to the medium, and the

personalization and convenience that RSS feeds provide rule the day.

So, get your RSS feeds together, whether it's your blog or your audio podcast, and ride the latest marketing wave before it's come and gone.

* * *

Online resources for legal marketers

* thelegalbroadcastnetwork.squarespace.com — Boston attorney Jan R. Schlichtmann's site that contains links to blogs and broadcast productions and podcasts

* www.legaline.com — access to Rockport lawyer Robert J. Ambrogio's blogs

* www.legaltalknetwork.com — contains links to numerous law-related podcasts and serves as a production house for attorneys and firms interested in producing audio content

* www.itunes.com — search and find law-related podcasts to get a feel for what's already in the marketplace

* www.law.com — hook your firm's sight into the law.com RSS feed to provide more content for those who visit your sight

* rsscases.marketingstudies.net — provides a wealth of information on using RSS feeds as marketing tools

* www.legalinsightmedia.com — site for a Wellesley company that produces video for marketing purposes

* www.odeo.com — allows you to create your own podcast for free and will send it out for syndication

* www.rssreader.com — provides free downloads for RSS readers

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