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In Practice

Lawyers Leap Into 'Blogosphere' Weblogs Grow As Marketing Tool

By Nora Lockwood Toohet

Robert W. Doyle Jr., a partner in Shepherd Mullin's antitrust and trade regulation practice group in Washington, D.C., isn't a techie. But when his firm's IT and marketing departments suggested transforming his group's monthly antitrust e-mail newsletter into a "blog," Doyle agreed to give it a try.

In the four months since the blog — www.antitrust-lawblog.com — was launched, the number of readers has skyrocketed to 50,000, up from 4,000 readers a month. And Doyle has become a believer in the power of blogs, or as they are called when scripted by lawyers and legal experts — "blawgs."

"It gets an unbelievable number of hits per month," Doyle said. "It really is amazing."

The blog still covers the same subjects as the newsletter — antitrust developments at the Federal Trade Commission, Federal Communications Commission, Department of Justice and international antitrust issues. But in only a few months, the blog has helped establish Shepherd Mullin's reputation as "the most comprehensive source of information on all international antitrust issues," Doyle said.

"Law firms put out tons of marketing materials in hard copy," he said. "This is a much more efficient way of distributing material, and you obviously get a wider distribution."

"More and more people are using [blogs] as a marketing tool," said Reid Trautz, a practice management consultant in Washington, D.C., and author of "Reid My Blog!"

Larry Bodine, a Chicago area legal marketing consultant and author of "Larry Bodine's Professional Marketing Blog," agreed.

"It's a golden marketing opportunity for a law firm to put up a blog," he said.

Explosive Growth

Blog is short for Weblog. Los Angeles lawyer Denise Howell — publisher of the "Bag and Baggage" blog (<http://bbg.blogspot.com>) — coined the phrase "blawg" for a legal blog.

So far, most blogs have been published by solo or small-firm lawyers. But large firms such as Shepherd Mullin are quickly jumping on the blogwagon.

Technorati, a blog search-engine and measurement firm, tracks more than 9 million blogs, up from 100,000 two years ago. An estimated 38,000 new weblogs are created every day — about one every two seconds.

A recent study by Pew/Internet estimates that about 27 percent of U.S. Internet users — or 32 million Americans — were blog readers at the end of 2004.

So far, legal blogs account for only a fraction of blogs. But that's quickly changing.

Robert J. Ambrogio, a solo lawyer and Internet consultant in Rockport, Mass., estimates there are currently about 1,000 legal blogs. But he said he gets several announcements every day about new ones.

"This is a very small part of the world right now, and an even smaller fraction of the legal community," Trautz said. "But it is growing by leaps and bounds."

Doyle said his firm's IT and marketing departments suggested replacing the e-mail newsletter with a blog for three reasons:

- To sidestep e-mail spam filters;
- To increase distribution; and
- To provide an interactive feature.

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Blogging Basics

By Nora Lockwood Toohet

Jim Calloway, head of the Oklahoma Bar Association's management assistance program, says that even the most technologically challenged attorney can become a blogging expert in no time.

"The effort it takes me to do a blog post is the exact same effort it takes me to send an e-mail," he said.

"I log into the system, I click 'post,' and then I push 'save' and it's published on the Internet," he said.

Here are some blogging tips:

- Personal weblogging software products, such as Typepad, offer templates and software that allow bloggers to simply log in and post updated information to the web. Reid Trautz, a practice management consultant in Washington, D.C. and creator of "Reid My Blog!" bought the top-end package, which costs about \$150 a year. But there are options for as little as \$50 a year.

• To provide a hyperlink to other blogs (which boosts the chances of popping up in a Google search), simply highlight the word, click on the link and type in the URL or go to that web address and copy in the address line. "It's a three-step process, and it's so simple," Trautz said.

• RSS (really simply syndication) feeds allow readers to automatically get headlines from selected blogs. To get the service, you register with a free RSS news reader such as FeedDemon or News Gator. Then, you select the sites you want to receive updates from by adding RSS feeds to your list.

• Bloglines — www.bloglines.com — is a free online service that allows Internet users to easily access and subscribe to RSS feeds and blogs.

Robert J. Ambrogio, a solo lawyer and Internet consultant in Rockport, Mass., said most people don't go to a blog to read it — they read it through a RSS feed that sends the content to their news reader.

"Because I've syndicated my site, anybody who wants to get my headlines through one of their [web] services can get it," Trautz said.

'Blogasbord'

New legal blogs are popping up daily on the Internet. Here are a few of the more popular ones:

- mayitpleasethethecourt.net — Created by J. Craig Williams, an attorney in a five-lawyer firm in Newport Beach,

Calif., this legal news and commentary blog gets 100,000 hits a month.

- www.antitrustlawblog.com — Produced by law firm Sheppard Mullin's antitrust and trade regulation practice group in Washington, D.C., this covers a wide range of antitrust issues.

• <http://myshingle.com> — One of the first blogs, created by solo attorney Carolyn Elephant, this focuses on solos and small firms.

• www.ernictheattorney.net/ — This blog from Ernest Svenson, a business lawyer in New Orleans, contains personal writings about music, photography and technology, as well as extensive links to blogs covering a range of legal issues.

• www.blawgpublic.com — Real-time search engine that monitors the legal blogging community every hour. Readers can browse excerpts of various discussions, from appellate law to technology.

• <http://pmt.typepad.com/professional-marketing-bl/> — Larry Bodine's Professional Marketing Blog.

• <http://reidtrautz.typepad.com/reidmyblog/> — Reid My Blog! — practice management tips from Trautz.

• <http://jimcalloway.typepad.com/lawpracticetips/> — Jim Calloway's Law Practice Tips Blog, an Oklahoma-based blog about practice management, the Internet and technology.

• <http://sentencing.typepad.com/> — Ohio State University law professor Douglas Berman's blog about criminal sentencing.

• www.scotusblog.com — Created by Goldstein & Howe in Washington, D.C., this blog contains the latest news and commentary about the Supreme Court.

• <http://appellateblog.blogspot.com/> — How Appealing — Devoted to appellate litigation, this blog created by Pennsylvania appellate attorney Howard Bashman is hosted by Legal Affairs magazine.

• <http://www.bmacewen.com/blog/> — Adam Smith, Esq. — New York attorney Bruce MacEwen's blog about law firm economics.

• <http://www.denniskennedy.com/blog/> — St. Louis solo attorney Dennis Kennedy's blog was one of the first on the scene.

• <http://www.legaline.com/law-sites.html> — Massachusetts lawyer's Robert Ambrogio's blog tracks "new and intriguing web sites for the legal profession."

"The technology behind it is so simple," Trautz said. "It's a simple way to create a place on the web that people can access your information."

Bodine agreed.

"You can set up a Web site for \$10,000, or put up a blog for \$10," he said. "I tell all my small-firm clients — forget the website, let's get you a blog."

Bodine advises firms to use blogs to showcase their lawyers' expertise. A blog should focus on a specific legal niche, such as patent or family law. And it should be updated frequently with the latest developments in that area of law, he said.

"What all these law blogs do if they're smart is put up new regulatory decisions or changes and provide insight and analysis," he said. "They complement the firm's website."

While websites are generally stagnant, blogs can be updated several times a day.

The other big reason for starting a blog, Bodine said, is to increase a firm's visibility on the Internet. Google and other search engines rate the relevance of a site by how frequently it's updated, as well as the number of other sites that link to it.

"The reason you want to have a blog is because it gets much more traffic [than a website] because search engines have tuned up their algorithms to seek and list blogs first," Bodine said. "Blogs are basically what search engines are looking for — text and something that's refreshed and interesting."

Ambrogio agreed.

"It's an incredibly powerful marketing tool in part because of [how it works with] search engines," he said. "In a time when law firms have been spending a lot of money on search engine optimization, blogging can be a much faster route to the top of the rankings."

'Handshake To The World'

J. Craig Williams, a lawyer in Newport Beach, Calif., estimated that his blog — mayitpleasethethecourt.net — gets 20,000 hits a day.

Williams, who started mayitpleasethethecourt.net in August 2003, estimates that his blog generates one new client a week for his five-lawyer firm, which specializes in complex business litigation.

"It's like being able to extend a handshake to the whole world," Williams said. "I can't meet that many people face to face; the blog gives me the opportunity to get to know people kind of virtually."

"If they're going to hire me, they can read what I write about and get to know me without ever really running into me. It's a wonderful way to establish a relationship," he said.

Ernest E. Svenson, a partner at Gordon Arata McCollam Duplantis & Eagan in New Orleans, said he's never been much of a glad-hander, and generally shied away from marketing opportunities. But his blog — "Ernie the Attorney" — has enabled him to market effectively without leaving his office.

"I was never a big marketing person when it came to going out and meeting a lot of people," he said. "But I'm doing sort of the same thing here. People read it and think they have a sense of who I am."

Legal Research

It's not just practicing attorneys who have legal blogs.

Several law professors have highly popular blogs that have attracted a wider readership than their traditional academic audience.

Douglas Berman, a law professor at Ohio State University, started his "Sentencing Law and Policy" blog as a resource for law professors teaching from a casebook he co-authored. The blog went online last June — just around the time the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision in *Blakely v. Washington*, which held that a jury must decide all factual issues beyond a reasonable doubt before a judge can impose a harsher sentence than the statutory maximum. (124 S.Ct. 2531 (2004.))

"I thought the blog would be a nice sup-

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