



Shelley Dunstone

# Online Social Media – Minefield or Goldmine?

By Shelley Dunstone

The internet presents many opportunities to waste time at work. For law firms, time literally is money – billable hours must be produced daily. Law firms have focused on how to prevent or limit the use of social media sites (eg Facebook) at work.

But what if social media could help you make better use of your time? Could it help you make money? Networking sites present opportunities for lawyers to position themselves as experts in their field and to attract clients. To build business, you must meet more people, keep in contact with them, and let them know what you can offer. That takes time. Using social media enables you to leverage your time, getting you in front of more people, more often.

LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) offers huge potential for professional people to build their profile. It's like Facebook for business. For law firms seeking to establish lawyer-to-lawyer referral networks, there is the global network Martindale-Hubbell Connected, which is operated by Lexis Nexis (visit <http://community.martindale.com>).

At its simplest, LinkedIn is like a business card box on the internet. Instead of just storing the business cards you collect, you can access people's contact details online and it offers much more information than fits on a business card.

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A completed profile is like a resume, providing information about educational qualifications, prior employment and personal interests. This information can reveal mutual interests, providing topics for conversation next time you meet. The records are kept up to date by the person who created them, making it easy to find people you've met, even after they have moved jobs.

Of course, there's no point just collecting a list of names, just as a box of business cards

doesn't make you any money. The main challenges with any sort of networking are staying in contact with people you meet and communicating what you do and how you can help. LinkedIn makes both of these easier.

After meeting someone at a networking event, invite them to “link in”. It's a way of following up your conversation and lets them know that you would like to stay in touch. The “status update” facility enables members to give a quick update on what they've been doing.

You'll receive a weekly email with a list of updates from your connections. These will sometimes prompt you to contact the person, perhaps to congratulate them, or just to arrange to meet. Similarly, your contacts will read your regular updates and be reminded about you and what you do. It's like networking while you sleep. A great way to post an update from wherever you are is to use Twitter. It's as easy as sending a text message from your mobile phone.

LinkedIn is also a way to meet people. You can ask a contact to introduce you to someone in their network. You will be offered suggestions of people you might know and you can invite them to join your network. People will also invite you to join their network. Sometimes these are people you know; sometimes not.

It's your choice whether or not to accept invitations from people you don't know, but if they look like someone you might like to do business with, why not accept? They've probably found you by searching using keywords. If you met them at a networking function or if they telephoned you, you'd speak to them, so why not connect? If you live in the same city, set up a meeting over coffee. You've just expanded your network.

You only have a limited amount of time for meeting with people face-to-face, if they are not current clients. When you are on hourly rates, you can't have endless coffees with people (although it's good to have a few well-chosen ones). With LinkedIn, you can network with people online, from your desk. Yes, it takes time, but your time is leveraged, to engage with a lot more people



in the available amount of time. It doesn't substitute for face-to-face contact, but supplements it.

The more actively and strategically you use the site, the more value you will gain from it. Build your network carefully. Provide information that is of value to your contacts – this may be in the form of articles, blogs, White Papers, audios or videos, or invitations to attend events. This is an opportunity for you to demonstrate your thought leadership – your expertise,

original thinking and understanding of industry issues. Join groups that are relevant to your field of practice and contribute to the discussions. Answer questions or ask questions to gain insight into the issues of your target market. Be known for what you do; build your brand online.

Finally, ask your current clients to recommend you on LinkedIn. You can send an on-line request which is easy and quick for them to complete. You can control

which recommendations are shown. This enables potential clients to see what your existing clients say about you. What better way to promote your services and build your practice?

*Shelley Dunstone is the Principal of Legal Circles and a Mentor with Thought Leaders. Her LinkedIn site features 387 connections, 32 groups, 28 recommendations by others, 18 work history items, 17 recommendations of others, 14 book suggestions, 3 slideshows and a status update via twitter feed.*

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