

Meeting Your Clients on the Ramp

By Brett Burney

Practicing law demands honesty and hard work, but sometimes landing a new client is about being in the right place at the right time. And today, the right place could be cyberspace.

The Internet has changed the way we communicate. Fifteen years ago, no proper lawyer would have contemplated sending a client an electronic mail message. Today, lawyers rarely use anything else in their daily interaction with clients.

So why do lawyers blatantly dismiss social networking sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter? All of us know someone obsessed with Facebook—perhaps it's even you. Your clients are no different. Maybe no one is using Facebook to conduct "serious" business yet, but legal-focused sites like Legal OnRamp (www.legalonramp.com) and Martindale-Hubbell Connected (www.martindale.com/connected) are filling the business-oriented void.

Getting on the Ramp

Legal OnRamp is the brainchild of a small group of in-house counsel and outside law firms. Mark Chandler, general coun-

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—JoAnn Hathaway and Diane Ebersole,
Practice Management Advisors

sel of Cisco, wanted a resource he could use to better connect with internal lawyers at other major corporations. Once the site started catching on, the consortium enlisted the help of Paul Lippe to lead the development of the project, and the site was opened to external lawyers and law firms.

Membership in Legal OnRamp is by invitation only. This may sound contrary to the open, social aspect of the site, but the restriction keeps participation healthy. If Legal OnRamp allowed anyone and everyone to be a member, it would dilute the focus on law and legal services. At last count, the site boasted just over 11,000 members with about half coming from the corporate, in-house side of the fence.

Legal OnRamp was designed to allow in-house lawyers to network and communicate with each other. Just as people use Facebook to informally poll their friends on the best cookie recipe or the best way to clean rain gutters, corporate lawyers can use Legal OnRamp to canvass fellow in-housers on how they handled sticky employment situations or developed records retention policies. They might also ask for recommendations for the least expensive law firms for handling real estate deals or drafting purchase agreements. After all, if in-house counsel were in a room together, wouldn't they be doing the same thing in person?

Now contemplate what would happen if private lawyers were in the same room. Law

firms could tout their experience in certain fields and offer competing price structures or fee arrangements. Legal OnRamp and similar sites provide the medium for these interactions, and the exciting news is that everyone can compete regardless of the size of their firm. The Internet is the great equalizer as long as you can follow through with quality experience and honest work.

Ramping Up the Activity

The most active areas of Legal OnRamp are the forums and groups. Members are invited to participate in forums by answering questions, offering advice, and discussing relevant topics. This may sound like a potential time waster, but some very pertinent discussions occur in the forums on topics that are precisely significant to the members of Legal OnRamp.

Groups are created by members and focus on specific topics, industries, school affiliations, etc. Groups can be public or private. Member profiles can be accessed with a click of the mouse to find user biographies, publications, and more. The member directory is invaluable for "connecting" with others.

Another section on Legal OnRamp full of content is "Updates & Publications," which functions as a clearinghouse for papers and "client alerts" from participating law firms such as DLA Piper, Baker Botts LLP, Allen &

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Overy, and Frost Brown Todd LLC. From the standpoint of an in-house lawyer, this section serves as a one-stop funnel for information that prevents the lawyer from having to visit each firm's website.

Law firms and vendors have also started sponsoring "service centers" on Legal OnRamp with names like "Employment Center" (Littler Mendelson P.C.), "Outsourcing Center" (Latham & Watkins LLP), "Discovery 3.0" (Applied Discovery), and "Legal Department Management" (Corporate Executive Board). These centers provide a wealth of information on specific topics.

Sliding Up the Ramp

From an in-house perspective, having a large pool of Legal OnRamp members from the outside is a powerful and cost-effective

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tool. Through Legal OnRamp, in-house attorneys can ask questions and pose hypothetical dilemmas to the hive-mind. The best responses could get rewarded with a new connection or even lucrative legal work.

Most importantly from a private lawyer's perspective, Legal OnRamp is not limited to a particular size law firm. While large law firms have always enjoyed a presumptive reputation for dealing better with large corporate client concerns, Legal OnRamp can be an avenue for smaller firms to show they can handle certain niches of work better and more efficiently than their large-firm counterparts.

For example, anyone can contribute to a Wiki topic or upload a helpful article or presentation to the site's "File Repository." Legal OnRamp also pulls in feeds from relevant blogs around the Web. These are opportunities to share knowledge and build a healthy reputation. Not everyone is comfort-

able with this notion, of course, but those who are willing to participate in the community can quickly become recognized as experts on a particular topic.

That last point is key to making Legal OnRamp a successful community: members must participate or the site will become meaningless. Just like so many other ventures in life, the value gained from Legal OnRamp is proportional to the time you put into the site. If you don't network, join a discussion, or reply to questions, you will not gain anything from being a member of Legal OnRamp.

Regardless of your stance toward online social networking, services like Legal OnRamp and Martindale-Hubbell Connected are offering viable avenues for client communication. If you can get motivated to participate in the community, the results can be profitable and rewarding.

If your client already participates on Legal OnRamp, then your participation dem-

onstrates that you are willing to interact with the client in a new, innovative medium. If you don't have a client on Legal OnRamp, then joining will allow you to find out the needs of potential clients.

After all, it's simply about being in the right place at the right time. ■



Brett Burney is principal of Burney Consultants LLC and focuses his time on bridging the chasm between the legal and technological frontiers of electronic discovery. Brett assists law firms in improving litigation support offerings and works with corporations in preparing for e-discovery. He is a frequent contributor to Law.com. You can e-mail him at burney@burneyconsultants.com and visit his blog at <http://www.ediscoveryinfo.com>.