

Legal PR: how is social media shaking up the mix?

Social media is increasingly the shop window for law firms and barristers' chambers—but is it a 'monumental waste of time' or a 'golden opportunity' to set out their stall? Grania Langdon-Down reports



New Law Journal teamed up with legal PR consultancy Kysen earlier this year to identify the latest trends in lawyers' media output through an online poll of law firms and chambers, interwoven with insights from interviews with legal, business development and marketing professionals.

But their perceptions about what works for them is just half of the equation. Now lawyers can communicate directly with their target audience, will it change the value they place on traditional media when seeking to publicise their work? Where is the line between trying to control the message and being an influential commentator? And as social media becomes increasingly important in the media marketing mix, how does this interconnect with the demands of GDPR which outlaws unsolicited material?

The online survey quizzed more than 38 firms, barristers chambers, marketing and publishing companies—from a 3,000-plus international practice and a 115-member chambers to a 14 fee-earner firm—on how they rated the value, influence and effectiveness of the different social media platforms.

LinkedIn and Twitter were the two most favoured platforms, followed by Facebook and Instagram. Other platforms flagged up were Pinterest; Google+; WeChat; Snapchat; and Paper.li, a content curation service.

In terms of legal platforms, Juriosity was highlighted for its offering of a free legal knowledge network; a professional directory; and tailored home feeds.

Clare Rodway, Kysen managing director, says LinkedIn and Twitter are the default social channels for the profession. But she also welcomes the way law firms and chambers are trying out a variety of platforms and differentiating in how they use them to impress different target audiences.

Communication tool

'Social media has become such a crucial communication tool,' says Catherine Calder, joint CEO of Serjeants' Inn Chambers and co-chair of the Legal Practice Management Association.

'It is the new shop window. Previously, the news page on our website was our key platform for knowledge-sharing and announcing chambers' developments. Now we push everything out via social media. It is clear from both the engagement statistics and from anecdotal evidence that that this is how we are reaching clients and contacts. We find it highly effective as a simple, split-second hit—and it's free.'

Calder picks up on the key issue that many engaging with social media forget—it is essentially a 'social' medium and its effectiveness varies with its audience.

'It's hard to build engagement with a set of chambers, or any organisation, on

social media, because it is such a personal medium,' she says. 'People want to connect with people—so we concentrate on connecting through the individual accounts of members of chambers and staff.'

'Our mission is to get everyone in chambers on LinkedIn. It doesn't matter if they are too busy to post material themselves, just connecting with relevant contacts and "liking" and sharing posts is enough.'

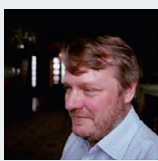
While Twitter is useful to communicate with students, pupils and legal commentators, she says LinkedIn is much stronger for their client community, with LinkedIn posts leading directly to new work.

Engaging with social media must be a personal undertaking, agrees Fred Banning, head of corporate communications at Pinsent Masons, if individual professionals want to become influential on Twitter or LinkedIn.

'Social media platforms invite engagement and exchanges with others, so you can't delegate this any more than you would ask your PA to present a seminar for you. But if you blog or tweet regularly and publish thoughtful content, it can really enhance your personal brand.'

But he stresses there is a distinction between the approach that individuals and organisations should take. 'There is often a sense that "the firm should be doing something". But, without that personal commitment, it's too easy for content to lack the real insight or authenticity the prospective clients will value.'

Where does social media sit in our marketing mix?



Simon Marshall,
chief executive of TBD
"The debate is no longer whether to use social media. The focus should be on when, where and how to use it and at what points of the cycle it is most effective"



Simon Marshall believes social media cuts across the four different lines that form the 'classic funnelling process' for bringing in new clients—communications; marketing; business development; and CRM. 'You can communicate to hundreds of thousands through press and social media; market to thousands through direct mail, events; and hone your efforts to tens or hundreds through targeted marketing events and BD efforts. Once reeled in as clients, CRM keeps them close and can be the source of advocacy for your work,' he says.

The debate is no longer whether to use social media, he says. The focus should be on when, where and how to use it and at what points of the cycle it is most effective. 'Social media is generally seen as more relevant in the "communications" and "marketing" points in the cycle,' he explains. 'But with some creative thinking it can be used highly effectively in the BD phase too.'

Marshall suggests researching a client or contact and sending a link to a relevant article by someone at the firm with an intelligent suggestion about a possible opportunity. LinkedIn can be used to continue a 'conversation' or reach out to a new contact by commenting on a deal they have done.

The approach must be strategic rather than jumping on the bandwagon just because others are doing it, which can prove a waste of time.

His advice is: 'Plan the same way you would any other communications activity. Start with the end game: what are you trying to achieve? Then think logically through who your target audiences are and what you need to be saying to them to achieve your aims, and then select your channel and how you are going to use it accordingly.'

Immediate reaction

As essentially a tech law firm, Bird & Bird has to be active on social media. Charlotte Green, its head of UK marketing and business development, says they have a main firm Twitter account plus sector accounts, curated by the practice teams themselves.

'Social media enables us to be more immediate. Previously, when a new piece of legislation came out, a professional support lawyer would slave over a client guide which, once completed and signed off, we would email and/or post ASAP,' she says.

'Now, given the same scenario we can push out an immediate reaction via Twitter. It might be just one sentence, followed by "Watch this space..."', so frontloading the debate before the more considered response is released.

'But everyone else is doing the same too, with every law firm chasing every client/contact, so it's a very crowded space.'

What is still developing is how social media fits with more traditional press activity. Now law firms and chambers can publicise their own news and opinions on their website and communicate directly with target audiences on LinkedIn or Twitter, it is important they assess the value, influence and reach of the channels they pick for their marketing output, while not losing sight of the value of being part of the 'traditional' media.

Policy matters

The online world can be an anarchic environment where a misjudged comment can go viral. As a result, some firms, which were previously relaxed about social media, are closing their Twitter accounts. Others are tightening up their monitoring and setting clear policies so staff are accountable.

'Influence and control are very different things,' says Banning. 'You certainly have more control pushing out content on social media. But a mention in the *FT* carries that all-important endorsement that one of the most respected news outlets considers your lawyers to be real experts on the topic area in question.'

'That, in a nutshell, is the value of press coverage today. Ten years ago, getting into a national was about reaching a large audience. Now that coverage is about validation of expertise. Pushing out your own messages on social media platforms can't compete with this.'

Where social media activity 'scores' over press is around 'control of message', he suggests. 'They both have their place. And it can be good for pushing out particularly niche topics that are hard to interest the press in.'

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Traditional v modern

The interplay between traditional and modern media is important, agrees Calder. 'We prefer to appear in traditional media, such as the *NLJ*, to reach the targeted readership of the publication, and then send the piece out on social media through LinkedIn, Twitter and our four practice-specific blogs to our contact and client-base.'

'Often we will coordinate a blog and a press article on the same topic, circulating both through social channels. It's a good way to amplify authority and profile and it maximises the impact of the time spent on the piece by busy barristers juggling other priorities.'

Previously, people were hesitant about writing an article to appear online rather than on paper, she notes. 'But now they really see the value—although appearing in print in *The Times* will always carry a certain status.'

Traditional media is still incredibly important, says Green. 'It adds "kudos" because the third-party endorsement shows the author is regarded by the newspaper, magazine or broadcast channel as sufficiently expert or market-leading to be invited to explain the issue in question to their audiences. This is important when building a reputation for a lawyer in an area of practice key to the firm.'

'Also press coverage works particularly well when combined with social media

activity, so a press cutting can be pumped out on social platforms with a note that your lawyer has been quoted in, for example, *The Times*. Video snippets of broadcast interviews shared on social media are also valuable.'

But, with so many news and information outlets, where do lawyers and other legal professionals go to as their first port of call for the day's legal news? Universally it was to an online source—no one said they relied on a hard copy magazine or newspaper. Favourites for the survey respondents were online newspapers or magazines, Facebook, Twitter and the radio. Other sources were Google, daily emails from specialist sites, news apps, emails from FromCounsel and Lawtel; e-newsletters from sector print titles; emails from *The Times* and key trade media.

'It's interesting that the first port of call is online rather than hard copy newspapers or magazines,' says Rodway. 'It is still from reliable legal news sources but it is coming in first thing in the morning on their phones or tablets.'

But one consequence of the fake news debate and concerns that social media platforms just become echo chambers is that lawyers are increasingly keen to find news sources that are accurate and authoritative.

'People are hungry for news they can trust and are prepared to invest in, and pay for, trusted and responsible sources,' says *NLJ*'s editor Jan Miller.

But it is important for lawyers to be very clear that those issues of trust go both ways and misusing social media can have huge reputational damage.

Engagement matters

The majority of respondents said their fee earners, partners and barristers posted on social media. The percentage varied—from a small firm where all post on LinkedIn to a firm of 2,500 employees where only 5% post.

However, others were less engaged, with one commenting that it is rare for members to post 'but several happily engage by liking/sharing', with another reporting a 'tiny level of activity'.

But while three quarters had someone who was responsible for social media, a quarter didn't. Some respondents use external PR firms; others use their marketing and BD teams, while some departments will allocate responsibility to a partner. One commented: 'One member organises the drum beat of activity but people still add their ad hoc posts and contributions'.

Rodway stresses that a good social media policy is important to set the limits

of what can and cannot be said on social media but it shouldn't be too restrictive. Any control they might lose by allowing individuals to post and tweet is more than made up for by the management control they gain in being able to see how staff really behave.

'There may be just as many disastrous conversations that happen in the marketplace, over lunches, and in bars etc, that management will never know about, yet they still have an effect on the firm or chambers' reputation,' she says. 'Far better to know what you are dealing with and be able to manage it.'

Individual firms and chambers will have different attitudes to disciplinary issues, depending on their culture, and a social media policy needs to be in tune with this.

'We have written some social media policies that, at the client's request, state in no uncertain terms that breaches will result in disciplinary action,' explains Rodway. 'Others merely set out a "suggested" approach and give helpful assistance and examples. The key is to achieve clarity so everyone in the business understands the organisation's overarching approach.'

In terms of managing any communications disasters, having a well-established presence on social media, with a clear voice and a good, appropriate following, is central to being able to put out well-worded statements quickly and contain or avert a problem.

The answer is not to pull up the drawbridge and refuse to engage in social media, she says. 'The problem may well begin by a tweet or post from someone outside the organisation, so all the firm or chambers is doing is making it harder to deal with a problem if one arises.'

Adding value

When analysing the value of social media, the survey respondents' top benefits were—increasing individual and firm/chambers profile, followed by access to people they might not otherwise reach; immediacy; keeping current and keeping up with competitors. But gaining new business and providing good value for money were also in the mix.

However, while one commented: 'It's not intrusive while being newsy and gets in front of clients easily without clogging their inboxes', there was also one resounding negative: 'It's a monumental waste of time better spent getting on with the job'.

It can be a 'monumental waste of time' if it's not approached in the right way, acknowledges Rodway. 'But get it right and it can be incredibly effective in raising your profile; making new

How does our social media profile interrelate with the demands of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)?



Nadia Cristina,
managing partner,
PM Forum

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The opportunities to tailor offerings are increasing as technology develops. Nadia Cristina, managing partner and co-founder of PM Forum, the community for professional services marketers, says they are being asked to provide training on 'how you show return on investment; marketing automation and linking with CRM; and chatbots—how do they personify the firm and how do you keep it on-brand so it projects an appropriate personality?'

But it is the ability to capture particular targets that could see social media solving the marketing problems thrown up by GDPR, she says.

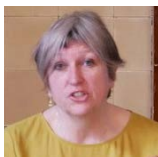
'Marketing professionals have long been making the point to their fee earners that targeting is key,' says Cristina. 'Why would you want to send something to someone who doesn't want it? It actually damages the brand.'

'But it's often the fee earners themselves who insist that a marketing target list should be as broad as possible, despite feedback from professional firm clients/prospects consistently showing how much they hate receiving irrelevant marketing material.'

This just underlines the fact that the adviser hasn't bothered to find out anything about them. 'So GDPR has brought a positive opportunity,' she believes, 'to clean out their database and rethink what they're doing. And because it's a law, fee earners are starting to accept the point—finally!'

connections that you can develop in "real" life—or IRL in social media parlance; and keeping in touch with what your clients and prospects are doing through their tweets and posts.

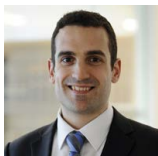
'I'm actually surprised and pleased that the number of respondents who recognise its potential as a means of winning business is as high as 36%, given many lawyers' starting point is that social media platforms are primarily there for crowing about their own achievements.'



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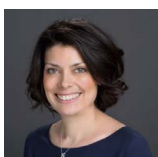
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People should embrace it, she urges. 'In social media training, I always stress that social media activity is as much about listening to clients and prospects, as it is about telling them about yourself and your firm/chambers.'

'Good business development starts with deep listening, taking the time to hear what's really important to the people you're selling your services to, so you know how to stress the difference between you and your closest competitor, and why you should be the first—in fact the only—choice to deliver what they truly want.'

There is also a defensive reason to be on social media too, she adds. 'If your clients and prospects are on these channels and you aren't, you're leaving the field wide open for your competitors to swoop in and start a conversation with them.'

But is there a danger that posting, tweeting, blogging is merely 'shouting into a void'?

Banning says it is much easier now to get a sense of 'impact' with the feedback from comment boxes at the end of online pieces, or engagement on Twitter and LinkedIn when press pieces are shared there, or through Google Analytics.

Firms and chambers are also using, or plan to use, more visual props, such as videos and infographics to make the content more accessible. As one respondent commented: 'Generally we stick with social cards and photographs for news as its not worth more investment time. But for campaigns we would create more media on the basis that we would get repeat use.'

Simon Marshall, chief executive of TBD, a legal marketing agency, says marketers 'love visuals because they are so effective in reeling readers in. But it is generally still a "no" from lawyers, whose default is words. But time-poor recipients appreciate intelligent visuals, because they have higher impact and are multinational'.

In the noisy news space, Green says 'visuals' have come into their own as a 'turbo communicator' of information and can no longer be dismissed as potentially 'dumbing down' legal content.

'In this context, visual communication is not about making things look pretty, but performing an important function,' she says. 'It grabs busy people's attention and makes sure that, if they only have time to read one lawyer's take on a new legal development, it's your lawyer's and not a competitor's.'

A good infographic can work well with longer-reads too, catching people's attention quickly and leading them to those longer and more considered piece.'

Sound & vision

Visuals certainly get more hits and views than written pieces, says Paul McFarlane, partner with Weightmans. 'Goldman Sachs, for example, have created a number of visual commentaries on topical subjects, such as two-minute dialogues between partners on Brexit. The material is just as intellectually valuable as written articles, but more accessible by clients. It's all about how you use the new media to communicate.'

Rodway agrees: 'In this age of information overload, visuals are a very good way of arresting attention.' As Julie Gingell, director of marketing and BD at SA Law, puts it, you need to create 'thumb-stopping' moments in people's daily morning iPhone scroll.

'Why will they stop to read your firm's explanation of the latest legislative development? If you offer a 30-second download of the essential must-know points in an eye-catching and clever graphic, this may well beat the longer reads on offer.'

But, apart from showcasing what a firm or chambers' lawyers are doing, does it also deliver new business inquiries? Half the survey respondents said yes, the other no.

'This is the beauty of social media and internet marketing,' says Rodway. 'You can track numbers of website hits, page views, social media shares, likes. Never before has the market's reaction to what firms/chambers put out there been so transparent.'

Tracking the path that has led to a new piece of work is a 'golden opportunity', she notes, for marketing departments to demonstrate their effectiveness and prove they too are 'fee-earners'.

Being able to show return on investment is also particularly important in the partnership environment, she adds, where the budget 'essentially comes out of equity partners' pockets'.

But internal expectations about social media bringing in work need to be managed, warns Banning. 'Our buyers are sophisticated and they often work on the basis of panel appointments, so the pattern of how work comes in is far less straightforward than in, say, a consumer-facing firm.'

With so many developments in social media, it can be hard to cut through the noise. But for Banning the single biggest success factor is *regularity* of publishing. 'That will drive real influence,' he maintains. 'If people only tweet a humblebrag on the day *The Legal 500* is published, no-one's going to be interested.'

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Grania Langdon-Down is a freelance journalist.

