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# LEVERAGE YOUR PROFESSIONAL BRAND ONLINE

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Leverage Your Professional Brand Online

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To be competitive, lawyers must develop personal brands and professional connections both offline through face-to-face networking and online through social media.

—Daniel J. Linna Jr., Assistant Dean of Career Development at MSU Law

If you were exposed to marketing and business development concepts during the course of your law school education, you are undoubtedly in the minority. However, if law schools continue to hire professors like Daniel Linna (quoted above), future generations of lawyers will enter the profession armed with a practical set of business development skills, unlike their predecessors.

Recognizing that social media is a powerful way to demonstrate expertise, MSU Law has encouraged law students to develop online branding skills by sponsoring a social media contest held in April 2015. Contestants built online communities and learned important information about their target audiences by exploring site analytics. Brian Pike earned first place by seeking “to create meaningful relationships and foster engagement” through strategically sharing relevant original and curated content with his communities through various social media platforms. We could all take a page out of Pike's playbook. Certainly those with the capability to spread their message online will capture “mind share,” which will no doubt increase their market share.

Further evidence of the importance of a strong online brand is found in a 2014 study conducted by FindLaw. FindLaw sought to track how people locate a lawyer when the need arises. According to survey results, 38% looked online, a sharp increase from 7% in a similar 2005 study. Notably, the percentage of people who ask for a referral from friends or relatives dropped from 65% in 2005 to 29% in 2014. The

same survey revealed that consumers increasingly use the Internet to check out attorneys before hiring them.

By now, a few of you may be asking: “What is a brand?” Marketing guru Seth Godin explains, “A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories, and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another.” A lawyer develops his or her unique brand over the years (an action at a time) by establishing himself or herself as a thought leader in the chosen field of practice as well as delivering exemplary client service. Further discussion about brand differentiation is found below in Step Two.

Most lawyers allow their brand to develop by chance. Well intentioned, many engage in a “visible branding” campaign (consisting of graphic components such as a logo and randomly chosen tag lines), neglecting to strategically develop the image and core message that reflect their “professional brand.” A lawyer’s unique professional brand (as described by Seth Godin) is developed as clients and referral sources experience the value offered by the attorney. Responsibility for creating and communicating that value and the underlying story that defines the brand rests with the lawyer.

Although personal professional online branding cannot be reduced to a blueprint, the following five steps can be relied on as the basis for an initial action plan.

### **Step 1: Audit Your Online Presence.**

Ask your clients as well as other lawyers to evaluate how you are perceived by the marketplace. Focusing on your current status will give you a starting point for building or enhancing your brand. Many resources are available that will allow you to investigate your cyber image. Here are a few simple ways to begin:

Google yourself and also set Google Alerts to send you notices when your name is mentioned online.

Put yourself in the shoes of a person who needs your services and conduct an online search using appropriate keywords. How does your online presence compare with the branding efforts of your competitors or even attorneys in your practice field who live in other areas of the state or country? Do you need to step up your game?

Set up a recipe (rule) on IFTTT (If This Then That). Sample Recipe: If Twitter mentions @sharperlawyer, then send me a daily email at [cindy@thesharperlawyer.com](mailto:cindy@thesharperlawyer.com). The possible recipes for monitoring your online presence are limited only by your imagination.

### **Step 2: Strategically Create Your Brand.**

Taking the time to explore and write your “story” in detail will reveal your uniqueness and serve as a starting point for differentiating yourself from the rest of the legal community. For example, how did you decide on your practice area, or what caused you to develop a general practice? Do you participate in professional or civic organizations? What distinguishing credentials have you built?

If you cannot yet define yourself as a “category of one,” start creating a new story by writing a blog or offering webinars on behalf of CLE or other seminar providers. Remember that it is up to you to control the narrative and to enhance your reputation. Your online personality and behaviors are also components of your brand. Are you approachable or silent, meticulous or sloppy, positive or negative, kind or snarky?

### **Step 3: Communicate Your Brand.**

Now that you have set yourself apart from the rest, you need to broadcast the message. It all starts with a website that authentically and transparently communicates what you stand for. Identify the platforms (i.e., YouTube, blogs, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook) that will be most productive in distributing your message. Many agree that “video is king” and have attracted clients through video blogs, podcasts, and short informational clips distributed through various platforms including email.

The challenge of building a significant following is overcome by distributing quality content that your target audience wants to read. One way to gain a larger following is to take advantage of a multitude of thought leadership opportunities found on the web. Most online publications (including blogs) are seeking great content and would welcome new guest writers.

### **Step 4: Strengthen Your Brand.**

Participating in online conversations as well as frequently and consistently distributing relevant content will help strengthen your brand. For example, an attorney who wishes to be known for her work in child custody litigation would be wise to follow on Twitter others who work in related fields. Not only does she have the opportunity to learn from the distributed content, but she now also has curated content to distribute to her followers, further enhancing the professional brand as an informed child custody attorney.

Make sure that your online profiles are kept up-to-date and that you make an effort to meet new people on a regular basis. Join relevant linked in groups and answer questions or submit comments. If you have written relevant articles on the topic, you could even post the content, which will further bolster your reputation.

### **Step 5: Constantly Monitor and Manage Your Brand.**

Get in the habit of using the resources outlined in Step One in order to keep apprised of details being posted about you and your firm. Building a strong online reputation bolsters your credibility and is the best reputation management tool and defense against any adverse virtual publicity.

If negative comments about your firm have been posted, react quickly and try to take the conversation to a private “venue.” For example, a possible response is, “I’m sorry that you are not happy with your experience with our firm. I will call you tomorrow at your number on file to discuss the situation. Please

let me know the best time to contact you.” The response is professional, courteous, and helpful, which is exactly the brand that you wish to project.

Newly minted lawyers are coming to the table with training in the business development arena. Attorneys who ignore and avoid the benefits of online branding and marketing will rapidly fall behind their forward-thinking competitors. Those who commit to the previously mentioned five steps will move forward quickly toward brand clarity and increased market share.