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Cynthia Sharp, Esquire
Business Development Strategist

The Social Media Strategist: Building Profitable Relationships

Cynthia Sharp, Esquire - The Sharper Lawyer

THE SHARPER LAWYER • 875 N. 24TH STREET • PHILADELPHIA, PA 19130
609.923.1017 • CINDY@THESHARPERLAWYER.COM • WWW.THESHARPERLAWYER.COM

THE SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIST: BUILDING PROFITABLE RELATIONSHIPS

By Cynthia Sharp, The Sharper Lawyer

ABA GPSolo eReport January/February 2018: Veterans Law

Nothing beats the impact of face-to-face encounters, whether in the context of networking functions or one-on-one meetings. However, social media platforms can also provide an advantageous venue in which to develop and advance relationships.

None of us has time to meet personally with all potential referral sources or other valuable contacts. However, with little investment of time, we have the opportunity to communicate through social media with a multitude of people—either as a group or individually. Also, we can meet certain individuals who would otherwise not be on our radar, as some who do not attend networking functions contribute heartily to online discussions. In addition, relationships formed in person can be cultivated through subsequent online connection supplemented with personal contact.

Attorneys who want to enhance the quality of social media relationships but don't know where to start will benefit from the tips provided below. The focus is primarily on LinkedIn and Facebook as these platforms seem to be most effective for the legal community.

Preliminary Activities

The adage "put your best foot forward" is relevant whether engaging virtually or in person. First impressions matter, which means that the website and active social media platforms should convey the attorney's professional brand before the targeted audience is driven to the site. However, don't let the perfect become the enemy of the "good enough." These platforms should always remain a work in progress, routinely updated and revised to reflect the attorney's professional growth.

Create a thought leadership initiative that is implemented on an ongoing basis. For guidance on this project, please refer to my previous article "Thought Leadership Initiative: A Roadmap for Law Firms," *Law Journal Newsletters*—An ALM Publication, March 2016 (31:11).

Establish monthly goals with respect to your social media–related relationship-building activities. Create a spreadsheet or invest in a client relationship management system to document progress. While generating healthy and predictable cash flow is the objective of any marketing program, intermediate metrics (such as phone calls or coffee dates) are also relevant. A written document acts as both a reminder and an accountability tool. Those who keep close track of completed actions will ultimately be able to correlate specific activity with increased cash flow and adjust the plan accordingly.

Become conversant with the ethics rules, opinions, and cases pertaining to attorney advertising in your jurisdiction. Testimonials, in particular, can prove to be a sticky wicket in some states.

Engage with Your Online Audience

When someone in your audience or community reacts to one of your Facebook or LinkedIn posts, be sure to personally acknowledge the communication. Otherwise, you are simply blasting out information as opposed to making meaningful connection.

Example: Although no longer actively practicing law, I enjoy keeping up with current developments in my prior area of expertise—estates, elder, and disabilities law. David Lefton (Immediate Past Chair of the Solo, Small Firm and General Practice Division) regularly posts curated articles on LinkedIn that interest me. I always "like" the articles he posts, which is easy because they are first-rate and relevant. When I comment, David inevitably "likes" my opinion or further participates in the conversation. Last week, he sent me a personal note through LinkedIn Messaging thanking me for my ongoing participation. I now feel even more connected to his practice, and David will certainly be "top of mind" when people ask to be referred to counsel in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Request Testimonials/Reviews

Entrepreneurial attorneys sought testimonials from satisfied clients long before the advent of the Internet. Online venues now allow these same lawyers to request an online post of the recommendation so the whole world can view social proof of the lawyer's standing. I suggest that you begin by seeking recommendations on LinkedIn and Google.

Start by adding a paragraph to your firm's client welcome letter explaining that you would greatly appreciate a testimonial at the end of the engagement and will send a reminder e-mail after the legal matter is concluded. The expectation now has been created, and your subsequent written request won't be a surprise.

At the end of the legal matter, the lawyer or paraprofessional who worked most closely with the client will place a phone call inquiring about satisfaction with services, explaining that it would be appreciated if the client would post an online review. Immediately after the call, send an explanatory e-mail providing detailed instructions as to the mechanics of writing a Google review. For those interested in guidance on asking for LinkedIn recommendations, check out Chapter 24 of Marc W. Halpert's recent book *LinkedIn Marketing Techniques for Law and Professional Practices* (ABA, 2017).

Don't forget to post quotes from the testimonials on Twitter and Facebook, also adding them to your brochure and other print material. Take a look at the testimonial page of my company's website (http://thesharperlawyer.com/testimonials), where we have posted not only the recommendation but also a headshot of the people who wrote the favorable reviews.

Most importantly, thank the person who posted the review both online and privately.

Many readers may be wary about asking clients to provide testimonials. Unless you live in a state that restricts their use, I recommend stepping out of your comfort zone and giving it a try. The partners of Bridgewater, New Jersey, law firm Friedman & Friedman did just that and obtained six new Google reviews in a four-month period. What is holding you back?

Leverage Speaking Engagements and Networking Functions

Recently, I was invited to be the luncheon speaker at a roundtable of professionals and adhered to the following process in order to maximize the opportunity and build my connections. As you read these steps, consider which aspects of this process you could adapt for your own purposes even in the context of networking functions and conferences.

1. Prior to the event, I requested the names of the 12 attendees, which my host graciously provided.

2. The day before the event, I sent each person a LinkedIn invitation to connect and included the following note with the invitation: "Looking forward to meeting you at the luncheon tomorrow. As you know, the topic of our discussion is the Basics of Social Media. Please come prepared with questions." As a result, four connections were made before the event.

3. At the event, I reminded those who hadn't yet connected to join their colleagues in responding to my invitation. Three additional connections were made. (If I am speaking at an event where the names are not provided ahead of time, I give away a book through a raffle and thereby receive the contact information of those who entered the drawing. The first request for connection is then made after the event.)

4. After the presentation, I e-mailed a copy of an article relevant to the subject matter to all attendees, reminding them to connect on LinkedIn if they hadn't already done so. One more person connected, resulting in a 66 percent LinkedIn connection rate from this group of potential clients.

5. The next phase, cultivating the relationship, began with sending a personalized LinkedIn message to each new connection. Having reviewed professional profiles, I was able to make relevant comments about activities, achievements, or personal background, demonstrating my interest in them. Example: "In reviewing your LinkedIn profile, I noticed that you served as

Judge Vogelson's law clerk. Have you stayed in touch? I haven't seen him in years. Please give him and his wife Sandy my regards."

6. Decide whether the relationship merits priority and personal attention and make a plan of action for cultivating the relationship both online and in person. Otherwise, simply add the contact information to your database, communicating through firm newsletters and alerts.

Conclusion

A firm can gain "mindshare" and develop a strong brand by engaging in an online marketing program that includes a thought leadership initiative. However, market share is enhanced as the attorney engages in meaningful and personal communication with the firm's community, building profitable relationships along the way.

Cynthia Sharp

Business development leader and veteran attorney Cynthia Sharp, Esq., works with motivated lawyers seeking to generate additional revenue for their law firms. The business development strategies and skill sets that she shares were developed and tested over a period of 30 years in practice and are constantly refined to reflect modern marketing techniques. For additional information about business development issues, check out thesharperlawyer.com.