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Cloud Crisis:

How Law Firms Can Use Social Media During a Crisis

By Rich Klein



Throughout the past few years, more law firm leaders have come to understand how social media can help build relationships that could lead to business.

Surely, if you are a member of a firm's communications/legal marketing staff, you know the challenges of convincing partners about the benefits of participating in any form of social media. Some of you are still working on it five years later.

Today, a firm's online reputation really *is* its reputation. And that's why social media must be employed when a crisis hits. Law firm leaders who are most concerned about their reputations will listen and make it their business to pay attention.

Whether it's a natural disaster like Hurricane Sandy, a malpractice lawsuit, loss of client data, allegations of discrimination or harassment or a negative news story about the culture of the firm,

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social media can help stop the “bleeding” and can be used to communicate with critical audiences at all stages of a crisis.

Unfortunately, too many firms have limited their entire online presence to a website and a LinkedIn profile, mixed in with a little AVVO and Super Lawyers. And even though one can post content to LinkedIn, it doesn't reach the masses in a crisis.

So what are the basic social media properties firms must set up long before a crisis hits?

- Twitter
- Facebook
- YouTube

Twitter is *the* place that influencers, like the media, go to first in the most serious crisis situations. While it's logical to post a media statement on your firm's website as a starter, the immediate next step should be to link to that statement from Twitter. Let's say your firm's main office was severely damaged by Hurricane Sandy. You might tweet:

“ABC Law NYC office damaged by #Sandy; attorneys working at home”

You could then attach the link back to your full press statement that resides on your website that might detail how the firm's employees are safe and that critical client data is secured offsite.

That same tweet can be copied and pasted to your law firm's Facebook page. Facebook can also be used to post photos of the firm's people and offices that boost reputation and that set the record straight.

YouTube is also important because it allows a managing partner, for example, to be the face of the firm.

Although many attorneys are camera shy, in the most serious crisis situations, there's a great need for law firm leaders to be “present.” You can write words of regret and express condolences but actually showing those emotions on camera makes it real and wins the firm high marks for transparency.

When should a law firm create a YouTube video? Examples include:

- Reacting to incidents involving deaths and/or serious injuries where showing humanity is critical (e.g., workplace violence)
- Responding to a major (accurate) news story that the firm allowed a culture of harassment or discrimination — and how the firm is working hard to ensure it doesn't happen again
- Extensive false reporting/online rumors that the firm is about to go bankrupt or be acquired and the managing partner wants to set the record straight

During a crisis, adversaries are likely to take cheap shots at the firm using the same social media sites noted above. Therefore, it's vital that law firms employ a social media monitor around the clock in the first few days and weeks of a crisis to assess what's being said. Don't leave the monitoring to a junior person just because you think they are well-versed in social media. Instead, use someone who can quickly identify a crisis situation online, which is not always obvious to a staff member who lacks experience in journalism, crisis communications or both.

Once a serious online reputation crisis is flagged, it's critical for marketing staff to get in front of the managing partner or executive committee to explain how the post(s) could impact the firm's reputation. The group should then quickly decide how to respond. Keep in mind, though, that every hour of inaction makes it harder to combat online attacks that can push the law firm's positive search engine results off the first page of Google. Remember — Twitter and Google don't care if the information is accurate and will be happy to spread the bad news quickly whether the firm responds or not.

Some online chatter can and should be ignored depending on the content and the source. But if a major media outlet has just tweeted a link to a negative story about a firm scandal, it's best to take it seriously.

The more credible the source of the post, the more likely the post will be circulated (e.g., retweeted by large numbers of people).

The court of public opinion has rarely been taken seriously by most lawyers. But with a 24/7 news cycle — and social media that permits anyone to be a citizen reporter — lawyers need to shift that kind of thinking.

Although Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are necessary, Google+ is another great tool because anything posted on Google+ will boost your search engine results.

In 2013, make sure firm leaders make crisis communications planning part of the firm's business planning. Work closely with them to create a crisis communications plan that's flexible and that takes into account a wide variety of scenarios. And, finally, get your firm's Twitter account, Facebook page and YouTube channel “combat-ready” long before a crisis hits. ■

Rich Klein is president of LawFirmsPR and founder of The Crisis Show.