



Using Social Media as a Listening Tool

By Justin Miller

justin@lawbizhelp.com

Independent Small Business Consultant

Social media has revolutionized the ways in which customers and companies interact. If you're in to social media, you've probably read all you care to about the subject. Or perhaps you continue to read as the landscape changes over time. Either way, perhaps I can provide a different take that you may not have already considered: using social media to *listen* to your clients, potential clients, industry thought leaders and referral sources.

Maybe you already have a catchy Twitter handle or a Facebook page or even a LinkedIn profile. Maybe you use your limited down time to post or write interesting tidbits for your audiences to read. And maybe, just maybe, you have figured out that social media can be a very cost effective way to market your practice. In a sense, this is the broadcasting side of social media...you are broadcasting your thoughts and experiences to enlighten your target audiences. But, like any form of communication, there is a flip-side: listening.

But what can you learn from listening via social media? An initial list may surprise you:

- What is "hot" in your practice area...
- New markets or ways to pitch your services to existing markets...
- What keeps your target up at night...
- Potential referral sources...
- Tips and tricks to deal with clients or run a better practice...

...and the list goes on. However, just like in the real world, listening requires more focus than broadcasting: more patience; more work and a greater ability to sift through the noise. But, arguably, listening provides more benefit to your practice. In my experience, if you are interested in using social media to listen, there are two main areas you can focus on (no, they are not mutually exclusive):

- 1) Identify and listen to communities, influencers, and authors in your practice area
- 2) Identify and listen to your target audience(s)

The first is fairly straightforward. Find other thought leaders and listen to what they are saying. These individuals are fairly easy to find: go where they live. If you're a criminal litigator, locate relevant people and groups on LinkedIn (e.g., ABA Section of Litigation: Criminal Litigation Committee or Trial Lawyer Network for Lawyers and Attorneys) or Facebook (e.g., Michael D. Weinstein PA, Criminal Defense &

Litigation or California's Premier Litigation Firm). Also try Legal Birds on Justia (<http://legalbirds.justia.com/>) for Twitter influencers. Locate ones you think you can learn from and save them.

The second group is a bit more challenging. To find potential clients, complementary services or referral sources, you can definitely use a similar approach as above. I would also suggest searching for companies or industries that may bear fruit. For example, let's say you are an Intellectual Property attorney and the majority of your "A-list" clients are in software development. Use social media to go where they are. Another way is to back your way into finding them. For instance, if you can identify some search terms (words and phrases) that relate to your practice area or common terms that companies or individuals use to talk about your practice area, you can find people that way. Search for the conversations and then target the people. These search terms can be invaluable as you work to find out how people are talking about the type of work you do every day. You may end up learning something you never knew.

So how do you get started? I recommend starting with free tools that are readily available from the internet. Define what you are looking to accomplish (your objectives), define your audience(s), create a short list of search terms and conversation topics, pick a tool from the list below and start listening. Just a few minutes every other day can reap tremendous rewards. Here is a sample of some useful (and free) tools you can use right now:

1. Google Reader (dashboard)
2. Netvibes (dashboard)
3. Google Alerts (news and buzz emailed to you)
4. Addict-o-matic (dashboard)
5. Social Mention (dashboard)
6. LinkedIn Groups (an endless supply of professional conversation)
7. Twitter Search (Twitter feeds)

Social media is here to stay. If you haven't begun tapping into the power it has to help build your business, you may find yourself left behind. Both broadcasting and listening through social media are tremendously cost-effective ways of building your practice and your brand.

Want to learn more? Contact Justin at justin@lawbizhelp.com