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Twitter 101 for lawyers

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While I've often repeated my recommendation that lawyers ought to take advantage of the networking and micro-blogging service, Twitter, I've yet to explain how to do so.

Not surprisingly, it is the "how" that matters because, at first glance, Twitter seems like anything but the wonderful tool that it is.

First things first — what is Twitter? Twitter is a free, Web-based communications platform that allows users to share information with others who have similar personal and professional interests. Users communicate using text-based posts ("tweets") of up to 140 characters in length.

Twitter currently has more than 3.2 million accounts registered, and its user base is expanding quickly. Companies and individuals use Twitter in a variety of unique ways, which are constantly evolving.

For example, large businesses, including Jet Blue and Wegmans, use Twitter to provide information and, occasionally, personalized customer service. Sen. Barack Obama's presidential campaign uses Twitter to connect with and update supporters. News outlets such as the BBC use Twitter to rapidly disseminate breaking news.

In some cases, news breaks on Twitter before the major news outlets report on it, which happened during the recent earthquake in California. California-based Twitter users were the first to "tweet" about the earthquake as they experienced it.

Of course, you're probably wondering whether Twitter has any value to you as a lawyer. It does. With Twitter you can network with other lawyers across the country and the world; promote your practice and its Web site or other online presence; receive news updates relevant to your area of practice and connect with potential clients or referral sources.

Twitter is an invaluable resource, as long as you know how to use it.

The first step is to create an account at Twitter.com. Make sure to choose a user name that is easily recognizable and promotes your practice.

The next step is to locate people and organizations you'd like to follow, including people you already know, those who practice in the same area of law, potential clients and users with similar personal interests. There are a number of ways to do this.

Locate people you already know by running your Web-hosted e-mail address through Twitter's system. (You'll be prompted to do so when you first sign up.) Once you've connected with people you know, check their follower lists and "follow" anyone who interests you.

Online directories, such as Twellow.com, conveniently categorize Twitter users for you. Review the directory to locate people with whom you'd like to connect.

Recently, two really useful lists were published by JD Supra.com (an online platform that allows lawyers, law firms and legal professionals to publish and distribute work online to a wide audience) at their blog, JD Scoop.

Both lists were created by Adrian Lurssen. The first is a list of "145 Lawyers (and Legal Professionals) to Follow on Twitter" (scoop.jdsupra.com/2008/09/articles/law-firm-marketing/145-lawyers-and-legal-professionals-to-follow-on-twitter). The second is a list of "Legal News Feeds on Twitter" (scoop.jdsupra.com/2008/10/articles/anothercategory/legal-news-feeds-on-twitter).

You also can search Twitter using Summize.com to locate people who are discussing topics that interest you. For example, if you're interested in wine, you can run a search for "wine" and other wine-related terms to locate other oenophiles.

After you've located people and companies, consider using a Web application such as Tweetdeck.com or Twhirl.com, which make the interface far more user-friendly by allowing you to organize and keep track of your conversations on Twitter.

Once you've set up an account and connected with a few people, start Tweeting about your day-to-day law practice, your firm's blog or other online presence, news of interest to you and your followers and any other topics that interests you.

Engage in conversations with other users by responding to their Tweets. Simply type "@username," then add your comment.

It only takes a short amount of time to set up an account and familiarize yourself with Twitter. Once you do, you may wonder how you ever practiced law without this amazing resource.

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