

# Technology Corner

*By Joseph G. Hodges, Jr.*

## Social Networking—Can It Work for Your Business?

In the last four years or so a host of “social networking” sites have come onto the Internet scene. In addition to the more popular ones like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, YouTube, MyLife and LegallyMinded, there currently are some 30 other such networks. These networks include 43 Things, Blogger, Digg, Fixster, Hi5, Netlog, PictureTrail, Web Results, Xanga, Amazon, Buzznet, Fotolog, iLike, LiveJournal, Pandora, Slide, Upcoming, WebShots, Yelp, Bebo, dailymotion, Flickr, Friendster, imeem, Multiply, PhotoBucket, Stumbleupon, Veoh and Windows Live Space.

While all of these networks are targeted at some facet of communications among people, each has its own unique approach to this, some of which are complementary to some of the other networks. In this column I will examine a certain number of these networks and the details of how they function with the objective being to determine the extent to which these networks might be of use to us in our businesses as trusts and estates professionals even though very few of these networks are specifically targeted as businesses.

I must caution here that I am personally extremely skeptical about the merits of using social networks to market a law or financial planning practice, mainly because using these various forms of social media exposes one’s life to the world in a way that may not be appropriate for a professional who relies so heavily on preserving client confidentialities at all costs. In addition, while we may have no reservations about sharing things with others about our personal lives through such medium, it is another thing to share things about our professional lives through this medium. We may find professionally that using other resources such as a Web presence on Lawyers.com, Martindale-Hubbell, or Westlaw, or our own firm



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Web site, is a more suitable method of advertising our expertise and obtaining clients.

Perhaps the most popular social network today is **Facebook** ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)), which was founded in February of 2004. It is free and anyone can join. According to Facebook, as of August 1, 2009 “250 million people were using Facebook to stay updated on what’s happening around them and share with the people in their lives. From the beginning, Facebook hasn’t been about building a Web site. Facebook is about all of the people using it and all of the things that are important to them. Each person who joins makes Facebook better by adding a presence to the site that friends and family can connect with and feel closer to.” Facebook’s overview states “Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet.” Facebook is loaded with helpful tools, including the traditional help function in the Help Center and a new Help Blog, so it is relatively easy to become a member and determine how Facebook functions. In order to find people on Facebook, you can do so through your e-mail address, or by searching for a name, or using AOL’s Instant Messenger or Microsoft’s Live Messenger, or searching by a last name, or by searching Facebook pages by name. Facebook is international in scope, with translators on its site for, amongst others, 64 different languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, French, German, Italian, Arabic, Chinese and Japanese. One interesting function on Facebook that relates to the issue of using it for businesses is the ability to set up a business page. Included in the selection of local services businesses is “professional services.” The same holds true for “Product.” Once you make this selection it asks you for the name of the professional service. You then have to certify that you are an official representative of this brand, organization, or person and that you are permitted to create a Facebook page for that subject. That is all there is to it except you have to first create a Facebook page before you can do this.

Fast on the heels of Facebook’s success came **Twitter** ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)). Started as a side project in March of 2006, Twitter has grown into a real-time short messaging service that works over multiple networks and devices in countries all around the world. Using this network allows people to follow the sources most relevant to them and access information

as it happens from breaking world news to updates from friends. Simplicity has played an important role in Twitter’s success. People are eager to connect with other people and Twitter makes that simple. Twitter asks one question, “What are you doing?” Answers must be under 140 characters in length and can be sent via mobile texting, instant message or the Web. Twitter’s core technology is a device agnostic message routing system with rudimentary social networking features. By accepting messages from sms, Web, mobile Web, instant message, or from third-party API projects, Twitter makes it really easy for folks to stay connected.

Users often ask if Twitter just provides too much information? Twitter’s response is, “No, in fact, Twitter solves information overload by changing expectations traditionally associated with online communication. At Twitter, we ask one question, ‘what are you doing?’ The answers to this question are for the most part rhetorical. In other words, users do not expect a response when they send a message to Twitter. On the receiving end, Twitter is ambient—updates from your friends and relatives float to your phone, IM, or Web site and you are only expected to pay as much or as little attention to them as you see fit.” Thus Twitter claims that “The result of using Twitter to stay connected with friends, relatives and coworkers is that you have a sense of what folks are up to, but you are not expected to respond to any updates unless you want to. This means you can step in and out of the flow of information as it suits you and it never queues up with increasing demand of your attention. Additionally, users are very much in control of whose updates they receive, when they receive them and on what device. For example, we provide settings for scheduling Twitter to automatically turn off at dinner-time and users can switch off Twitter updates at any point.” The problem with all of this for me is that most users do not tune in and out and in fact can be found constantly viewing and responding to messages, *i.e.*, the proverbial text messaging syndrome.

In describing what is next for Twitter, they state on their Web site, “We continue to follow user behavior and pay close attention to feature requests. We launched our mobile site, [m.twitter.com](http://m.twitter.com) after getting lots of requests for this feature. However, we are also very much guided by our philosophy of keeping things simple and intuitive so we like to restrain ourselves with regard to features. That being said, people seem to be calling for more interesting ways to share feedback with one another and organize

themselves and their updates into groups—we're paying attention to these requests." For ongoing information about Twitter, they provide a company blog at [www.blog.twitter.com](http://www.blog.twitter.com). According to this blog, many users are seeing a wide variety of businesses using Twitter in interesting ways to create value for customers and consumers. As a result, Twitter says it has coordinated with business students and writers to develop some interesting findings, best practices, steps for getting started and case studies. The results supposedly demonstrate how customers are getting value out of Twitter and suggest techniques businesses can employ to enhance that value. Information about this can be found at the bottom of every page on Twitter where there is a new link called "Business." This will take you to a suite of Web pages called Twitter 101, A Special Guide.

Another relatively new player in this environment is **LinkedIn** ([www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)), a business-oriented site that was founded in late 2002 and now has over 40 million registered users. My initial introduction to LinkedIn was my receipt of an e-mail message inviting me to open and respond to a promotional e-mail from a Section 1031 Exchange firm whose messages I had been following separately. This was soon followed by two more messages, one from an attorney in Paris I know and one from the head of a local employment agency I often use. I have since received five more invitations to join LinkedIn. Wanting to live dangerously, I went ahead and opened a minimal LinkedIn account, mainly to see what this network is all about. This produced a New User Guide and a link to the What Is LinkedIn page. The User Guide leads you through three basic steps to begin using this service. Those are described as (1) own a profile that truly represents you, (2) ensure your connections represent your real-world network and (3) leverage the power of your LinkedIn network. Essentially this means you describe yourself, upload all of your mailing list addresses and then post a question and see what sort of responses you get from your "connections."

As for what is LinkedIn, their Web site says they use a gated access approach that makes it "the world's largest professional network ... LinkedIn connects you to your trusted contacts and helps you exchange knowledge, ideas and opportunities with a broader network of professionals." They even provide a short video that gives you an overview of what LinkedIn is and how it can help you. Their Web site further explains their purposes and functions as follows: "LinkedIn gives you the keys to controlling your online

identity. Have you Googled yourself lately? You never know what may come up. LinkedIn profiles rise to the top of search results, letting you control the first impression people get when searching for you online. In today's professional world, people change jobs and locations constantly. By connecting on LinkedIn, your address book will never go out of date. Your contacts update their profiles, keeping you current with their latest jobs, projects and contact info. You'll stay in closer contact with great tools to communicate and collaborate. Sometimes your immediate circle can't resolve a unique business challenge. Tools like Answers and Groups let you locate and interact with experts through trusted introductions. LinkedIn Search lets you explore the broader network by name, title, company, location and other keywords that will help you find the knowledge you're looking for. Whether you are looking for a career opportunity, winning new clients or building your professional reputation, LinkedIn connects you to jobs, sales leads and ideal business partners. With our powerful search engine, company research tools and a jobs board that shows who you know at listed companies, LinkedIn is the place to turn for new opportunities."

Since initially signing on to LinkedIn I have received at least two e-mails per month notifying me that others who initially e-mailed me have made additional connections, joined new groups, changed their profiles or received recommendations from others (usually solicited), most of which is information I could care less about. Fortunately, I can adjust my e-mail notifications so I will no longer receive messages like these or only the parts I want. Here is a good example: An attorney I know in Texas posted one day under the status category that he was getting his February bills out (shades of Twitter, no?). I guess what I am saying here is that I currently have serious doubts about the value and utility of this network to us as estate planning and administration professionals in spite of their alleged 40 million members and growing.

Still another popular site that is worthy of a look-see is **MySpace** ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)). This site seems to combine the best of the Facebook and YouTube sites in that its main function is to allow you to search for and find and maintain contacts with old and new friends, and yet it also allows you to upload pictures and videos as well as music and you can even establish your own Web address. They even have a MySpace Mobile area and multiple ways to share what you are up to via blogs, MySpace IM, messages and forums. There currently are no specific Profiles

available for lawyers or financial planners, but that is probably just a matter of time. My concerns about MySpace are the same as I have already expressed about the other social networking sites.

**YouTube** ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)) is another popular social network, although its functions are limited primarily to the uploading and sharing of videos. According to Wikipedia, three former PayPal employees created YouTube in February 2005 and Google, Inc. bought the company in November 2006. In November 2008, YouTube reached an agreement with MGM, Lions Gate Entertainment and CBS, which will allow the companies to post full-length films and television shows on the site accompanied by advertisements. The company uses Adobe Flash Video technology to display a wide variety of user-generated video content. Most of the content on YouTube has been uploaded by individuals. Videos uploaded to YouTube are limited to ten minutes in length and a file size of 2 GB. Unregistered users can watch the videos, while registered users are permitted to upload an unlimited number of videos. Videos that are considered to contain potentially offensive content are available only to registered users over the age of 18. The uploading of videos containing defamation, pornography, copyright violations and material encouraging criminal conduct is prohibited by YouTube's terms of service. One of the key features of YouTube is the ability of users to view its videos on Web pages outside of the site. Each YouTube video is accompanied by a piece of HTML code, which can be used to embed it on a page outside the YouTube Web site. This functionality is often used to embed YouTube videos in social networking pages and blogs. Some mobile phones are capable of accessing YouTube videos, depending on the provider and the data plan. YouTube Mobile was launched in June 2007. Since June 2007, YouTube's videos have been available for viewing on a wide range of Apple products.

One sad note came to light when I signed onto the YouTube home page. I was immediately notified that support for the browser I was using (Internet Explorer 6.0 on this particular PC) was going to be phasing out soon. Kindly I was offered the options to upgrade to Google Chrome, Firefox 3.5 or Internet Explorer 8.0. I won't digress here into what I think of Web sites that force us to upgrade our software, often into versions that will not run on our existing PCs, thus forcing us to buy newer PCs at considerable expense. In this instance I think I will wait until my Version of IE 6.0 is dead in the water before switching, as access to

YouTube for me is by no means essential. Besides, if the video clip is good enough, it usually makes its way to all of the popular news and entertainment TV shows within days of its first being posted.

Given that YouTube concentrates on video clips that can be no longer than 10 minutes in length, it is difficult for me to see how useful this network is as a social networking site as opposed to as an adjunct to such a site. Interestingly, YouTube has its own blog where you can explore its content in a variety of ways and search for ways in which it might be a useful social networking tool, and each topic typically has numerous comments to it posted.

One of the newer social networks is **MyLife** ([www.mylife.com](http://www.mylife.com)), which was launched in February of 2009 as a single source for people searches when Reunion.com and Wink.com merged. Here you can have a basic free membership or a premium one that allows you to discover who is searching for you and get updated search results plus choose several membership options. There are three basic selections on their main menu. Those are (1) find anyone you know about that might be on this network, (2) see your school friends and (3) build your network by seeing who is on the network and inviting others to join it. This network claims to have over 58 million members. After joining, the first thing I began to receive were e-mail messages telling me how many people had searched for my name, or Goggled my name, or visited my profile, or done an active search on me, or sent me an e-mail. Sadly, if you follow up on these contacts, they often lead you into the Premium level and the PeopleFinders Web site, which charges a fee for most of the searches it can do. This feature alone is enough for me to consider this network of little use for serious social networking.

The last social network I want to mention is the ABA's new **LegallyMinded** (Beta) social network developed by the American Bar Association in 2009 for lawyers and their support staffs. As the ABA describes it, "LegallyMinded is an online community serving the legal profession. Our goal is to create an unparalleled resource that gathers law school students, academics, firm administrators, legal support staff, judges, paralegals, attorneys, law librarians and other professionals to contribute, network and collaborate online. The community fuses cutting-edge social networking features, top-notch news and articles, and user-generated content. LegallyMinded enables you to: (1) connect with peers and expand your professional network using member-matching features to discover like-minded

professionals plus find mentors, research employers or meet new friends; (2) share knowledge, exchange ideas, files and schedules within virtual groups and engage with other members via blogs, wikis, chats and discussion groups; (3) explore resources as the LegallyMinded editors scour the Internet for the best content on Careers, Education, Practice Management and Diversity, among other topics; (4) schedule meetings and set up meetings with community members using your integrated calendar; and (5) voice your opinions and rate and comment on community content." Importantly, you are not required to become an ABA member in order to participate in this site. Interestingly, the Home page for this network brings you a whole host of daily current information, including the latest legal news, key Blog posts, how to Get LegallyMinded, resources, Legally Tweeting, recent job postings and pictures of latest members who have joined. Several exiting improvements are currently in the works, including an improved Profile page, a new Group page, a new Dashboard and a new Edit Profile tool. These improvements were set to be rolled out by October.

Sadly the limitations of this column do not permit me to explore any of the other 30-plus social networking sites that are listed at the beginning of this article, but I encourage you to explore them on your own. Also, be cautioned that new ones are opening up every day, often with features that

build on and are significant improvements in what has gone before. This is a very competitive business that is in a constant state of flux. My only final note of caution is to concentrate on the sites that offer the best features for your kind of professional practice and don't fall victim to the social networking fads. In addition, when you first sign on to one of these networks, I suggest you keep your "Profile" to the absolute minimum until you have had a chance to see the network in action and determine if it is the right one for you.

#### **Featured Web Sites:**

2009 ABA Legal Technology Survey Reports  
[www.abanet.org/abastore/index.cfm](http://www.abanet.org/abastore/index.cfm)

Turning Twitter Traffic Into Paying Clients: Twitter 101  
[www.business.twitter.com/twitter101](http://www.business.twitter.com/twitter101)

Facebook and MySpace Users As Witnesses - Philadelphia Bar Association Professional Guidance Committee Opinion 2009-2 (March 2009)  
[www.philadelphiabar.org/WebObjects/PBAReadOnly.woa/Contents/WebServerResources/CMSResources/Opinion\\_2009-2.pdf](http://www.philadelphiabar.org/WebObjects/PBAReadOnly.woa/Contents/WebServerResources/CMSResources/Opinion_2009-2.pdf)

2009 Solo & Small Firm Technology Guide  
[www.abanet.org/abastore/index.cfm](http://www.abanet.org/abastore/index.cfm)

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