

Global Issues – Service Providers

Connecting The Corporate Counsel World: Global Online Networking

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Recently I met with the general counsel of a media company that was in the throes of a very painful lawsuit initiated by a plaintiff's lawyer. He lamented the fact that he knew other companies have faced similar actions by the well-organized plaintiff's bar, but he didn't know which specifically had been targeted.

If only he had a way of discovering which of his corporate counsel colleagues had faced similar actions, he'd be able to benefit from their experiences and best practices. The problem, he went on to explain, is that corporate counsel aren't nearly as well organized and networked as the plaintiff's bar. He threw up his arms as if to say, "Well, that's just the way it is."

But does it have to be? With the emergence of online networks, the answer is "No, it doesn't have to be that way."

What Is Online Networking?

After the internet boom-and-bust of the late 1990s, companies took a new look at how the internet could begin to realize its full potential. The second generation of the internet, sometimes known as Web 2.0, places an emphasis on websites that facilitate collaboration, creativity and information sharing among users globally. Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia built and updated by its users, is the quintessential example of a Web 2.0 technology.

Social-networking sites are another well-known example. These sites, which include familiar names such as Facebook and MySpace, bring together people from all over the world with shared interests to form an online community. These broad communities serve many purposes, acting as a hub to regularly connect people who have pre-existing relationships while also helping them to develop new ones. They offer open forums for people to chat, problem solve and discuss shared interests. And, as anyone who's spent time on Facebook knows all too well, some of the sites offer countless ways to procrastinate! However, none of these are of particular help to corporate counsel as they don't serve any obvious business value. Corporate counsel simply don't have time to socialize online, because they have far more pressing issues on their minds.

More recently, online networking sites targeted toward a general business audience have appeared. These sites are more focused – no games and other time wasters to be found – but typically lack the cohesive community that many in the legal profession desire. And, these sites emphasize how many people you can add to your contact list rather than the quality of contacts and the ability for meaningful, productive business collaboration between like-minded members.

Consequently, we're starting to see more networking sites that exclusively serve single sectors. The legal profession is no different, and several networking

sites are already out there.

Building upon its pre-existing network of nearly 950,000 lawyers, Martindale-Hubbell is now one of them with the recent launch of Martindale-Hubbell Connected. For years, Martindale-Hubbell has regularly held Counsel to Counsel events where corporate counsel gather in a trusted environment for candid discussions. These "C2C" sessions have helped to facilitate communication, problem solving and networking for corporate counsel. Martindale-Hubbell Connected is a natural extension of these discussions. It's a virtual community where in-house counsel can gather to connect with one another, build their go-to referral networks, and collaborate to solve business problems.



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Benefits And Opportunities For Corporate Counsel

An online networking site created exclusively for corporate counsel would be more accurately described as a "professional community," and has an entirely different reason for being than more general social networking sites.

Based on conversations we've had with corporate counsel over the past year, we know they want a community that helps them solve problems in their area of expertise, or in the business of law. We also know they require a secure environment of trusted legal professionals – knowledgeable contacts who verifiably are who they say they are, and have a certain standard of professional ethics and legal background.

A site like the new Martindale-Hubbell Connected meets those specific needs of in-house counsel to foster a collaborative community – for corporate counsel, by corporate counsel. Users can build meaningful professional relationships with other in-house counsel and will be able to tap the expertise of their network, share insights and work together to solve business problems.

A professional network built exclusively for the legal community offers myriad advantages:

Breaking isolation. Corporate counsel often report they're isolated from other in-house counsel on a day-to-day basis. Frequently they're faced with legal and business challenges that counsel from other companies must have encountered. The challenge has always been how to find these colleagues and benefit from their experience. In-person conferences and events are one option, but they're infrequent, expensive and take time away from the office. A site like Martindale-Hubbell Connected helps break that isolation by providing a 24-7-365 trusted environment in which they can find colleagues, collaborate and solve pressing problems.

Better referrals when hiring outside counsel. Ninety percent of corporate counsel say they rely on a recommendation from a trusted colleague when hiring outside counsel. A network full of quali-

fied, verified and experienced contacts greatly increases the pool of contacts to draw upon in this important process. And with tools to help corporate counsel grow their networks and thereby increase their go-to referral sources, users can quickly and easily find colleagues who can recommend the right lawyer for the right matter.

Better decision making. If you've visited more general business networking sites or listservs, you know that many users participate as a means to an end: they are there to sell their services. Corporate counsel do not have that focus, nor do they want to be sold to. Instead, a site like Martindale-Hubbell Connected cuts out the clutter and distraction, and delivers capabilities, content and information in a secure environment to help corporate counsel make more informed decisions.

More global reach. Business grows more global by the day, and with it comes the need for increased attention to legal issues in more countries around the world. A truly global network enables corporate counsel to stay abreast of critical legal issues, trends and decisions in emerging and established markets with contacts from those nations. Having a global professional network exponentially also simplifies the often-arduous task of getting international legal referrals.

Solidify trust with leadership. The interaction with qualified and knowledgeable corporate counsel worldwide enables users to share benchmarking data and best practices. This collaborative environment helps legal departments make better use of their legal budgets, spot risks before they become liabilities, and demonstrate their value to other business units and corporate leadership.

What Should In-House Counsel Look For In A Legal Networking Site?

Not all online networks are created the same, with equitable resources, content, capabilities, global reach, security or a critical mass of contributing users. Therefore, it behooves any legal professional to do a little homework first. Regardless of which community is ultimately joined, here are several key criteria to consider when evaluating a networking site:

Is the site specifically designed for legal professionals? Corporate counsel? Selecting as specific a network as possible will help members make more strategic connections, benefit from higher-quality contributions, and gain access to the most relevant content for their needs. It will also minimize disruption caused when non-lawyers hijack the network to sell their services. For example, the Martindale-Hubbell Connected site initially focuses exclusively on corporate counsel, but ultimately outside counsel will be invited to join. However, this will be done in a very controlled manner with a secure channel only for corporate counsel and the ability for members to create their own groups consisting of attorney-members they deem appropriate.

Is there a critical mass of the right people? Look for a large pool of participants who are also corporate counsel. As corporate counsel, it's hard to derive business value from such general com-

munities because the other participants are unlikely to have experiences that are relevant to your problems.

What capabilities does the site offer its users, and does it offer more than quantity of contacts? Consider whether the network has discussion forums, the ability to publicly and privately share documents, real-time discussion groups, email, polling, instant messaging, and invitation-only groups that users can create and manage themselves. Are members actively using these features?

This is worth investigating because networking is not the same thing as collaborating and solving business problems. Many legal "networks" are really online platforms that offer tools to help users communicate with one another, post documents and solicit work, but they are not truly designed to build communities that help corporate counsel solve business problems. One unique feature of Martindale-Hubbell Connected is that it taps the power of our global legal directory to facilitate relationship building. It also provides outside-counsel management tools to deliver additional business value, such as the ability to submit and access outside counsel reviews.

Is the site unbiased, and can the vendor be trusted? An online networking site should allow you to engage in free and objective discourse. If the network features heavy-handed moderators, is overrun with ads or otherwise comes across as nothing more than a sales pitch, you should probably look for a more unbiased networking site. Additionally, a site created by an established company has the advantage of having the expertise and critical insights needed to create a quality network, as well as the ability to attract new members more quickly than a startup.

Is the site global? A quality legal network should have a global reach and international user base. As national barriers fall, more companies find themselves operating in a global environment. Most users will find value in having access to corporate counsel with first-hand experiences in different countries.

Conclusions

Online networks are here to stay, and communities built just for legal professionals are now emerging. Any competent attorney knows the value of due-diligence, and in this environment we believe corporate counsel should carefully review any legal networking site before committing time and energy to its use. Whichever site is chosen, make sure that it's a place where you'll feel comfortable enough to actively participate, where your contributions are valued, and where the contributions of other users prove valuable to you.

Ultimately, this will be time well spent not just because it has the power to connect users to a world of trusted contacts who share the same business and legal interests, but also because these communities have the potential to become an essential business tool that helps overcome isolation, allows users to quickly tap into the collective knowledge of other experienced attorneys, and empowers collaboration to solve very real business problems.

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