

Staying with online

Is all the talk about social networking for business purposes just hot air, or is it genuinely the way of the future? AMRUTA SLEE finds out.

DURING THE RECENT talks in Copenhagen, the firm Norton Rose, which does a lot of work on climate change legislation, flew partners from the UK and Dubai to Denmark to report back on developments. Partners variously sent updates via Twitter and a blog, both of which were then linked to the company's website, its Facebook page and its LinkedIn page, where interested parties, and potential clients could read about unfolding events.

Was the exercise worth it? Definitely yes, according to

Norton Rose senior associate, Michael Park. Although he's not sure how much actual business came out of it, using technology in this way gave the firm a certain cachet.

"Most law firms put out legal updates every month or two months on climate change legislation," he says. By having people on the ground, by using technology to communicate big news so directly, Norton Rose was perceived as "keeping ahead of the game".

"People are increasingly demanding more instant feedback on the law and on changes to the law. Social net-

Legal recruiter Jason Elias checks out prospective candidates online. PHOTO: PETER SOLNESS



ahead of the game social networking

working allows us to do that."

You've probably heard of social networking, which in essence is about making connections with others like you through online sites like Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, Wiki and others. And you've probably also heard that some lawyers are using it to do business.

If your only experience is via Facebook or Twitter, it's reasonable to wonder why and how; after all, Facebook has forged a reputation which puts it in the realm of reality TV shows. It's the place where people confess social transgressions, painfully detail their hobbies and tell you they've just put out the garbage.

But talk to people like Park, who are regular social networkers, and they'll tell you that online networks are being used in other ways as well.

Widespread

Most companies now have a website and many are exploring having a LinkedIn profile – either a general one for the firm, or for individuals within it. Some have Twitter sites of their own, or are plugged into Twitter in some way. Blogs are increasingly used in-house, not just by CEOs talking up the firm, but by other people within a company, to convey information about what they do, or just to create that modern necessity, the personal brand.

The people approached for this article all made a distinction between Facebook which is seen as purely personal and social, and, say, LinkedIn, which has set itself up as a tool for professionals. A California-based company, LinkedIn has ostensibly the same set up as Facebook – setting up a Linke-

dn page is free and the site acts as an online CV.

The difference is that LinkedIn is a far more focused community; it may observe a certain netiquette in that too much crass self-advertising or an openly 'what's in it for me' stance is frowned upon, but at its core, it's about selling yourself, your firm, your expertise.

Jason Elias, a former lawyer who now runs the legal recruiting firm Elias Recruiting, is an enthusiastic and daily user.

If he is looking to recruit someone in a specific area, he will first check in with LinkedIn to see who is working in that field; on other days he uses it to research people's backgrounds or just to keep up with who is working where.

His own LinkedIn page is an exemplary mix of the strictly professional and the grabby, quirky detail, like the fact that

his comedy group, Shmux in Tux, were three times Koshers TheatreSports winners.

A few years ago LinkedIn introduced group sites – you can set up or join one for solicitors in general, or, if you like, for intellectual property specialists – or, if that is still too broad, for intellectual property specialists from South Africa. Noting that the group users were more active, Elias has set up his own lawyer's group. So far, he admits the uptake hasn't been huge, but the group has attracted 152 users without doing any promotion.

What do the users do? Elias says they talk to each other about professional problems and issues. He often sends through relevant news updates to create a flow of information and to start conversations.

Participants may arrange to meet offline, or they might

agree to not meet at all. The thing to stress, he says, is that online networking is only a component of regular networking.

As he notes, there will be a point where, if someone wants to offer you a job, they'll want to meet you face to face, to confirm you don't have halitosis, or worse.

Is there a chance they'll also have looked at your Facebook page where the sober professionalism of your LinkedIn profile is undermined by an account of last weekend's drunken revelry? Like everyone who uses online networking, he cautions against putting anything up on either your Facebook or LinkedIn page that you wouldn't want an employer to see.

Smaller practices

According to Elias, the benefit of sites like LinkedIn are

Michael Park of Norton Rose says Twitter and blog updates from partners during the recent Copenhagen climate change talks gave his firm a certain cachet. PHOTO: STUART MULLIGAN



their range: one site can reach a huge number of people, making it a cost-effective marketing tool. While that may not be of that much interest to big, well-established firms, it's a boon for smaller practices.

One of those is Phang Legal, a small incorporated legal practice of three solicitors, based in Parramatta. Director Ern Phang is demonstrably at ease with technology. An early adopter of websites and email as marketing tools, he now blogs and writes articles on several sites and has a visible presence on social networking sites, which he considers a reinforcement of his physical networks.

He uses email actively – that is, his firm's email signature comes with news and legal updates he thinks will catch the eye of prospective clients – and encourages others in the firm to follow his example, to blog as often as possible so that they can get traffic flowing through various channels and onto the firm's website. To him, virtual society is as real as 'real' society, and he sees social networking sites as a way of contributing to that. And, of course, it's good for business.

Asked to cite examples, he explains that regular blogging on relevant topics attracts more people to his website and establishes awareness of his firm's name. How does he



He would "have to be networking 24/7" offline to get the kind of exposure he does online, says Phang Legal's Ern Phang. PHOTO: BRENT MELTON

know? "When I go to events, people often say 'I've heard of you', or 'I've seen your website'," he offers.

"For an average client, when they want to know about you, it's 'where's your website?' by which they mean 'where do you exist?' A static web page, meaning a page which simply announces the existence of a firm, is no longer enough – it looks old-fashioned, and worse, it looks uninterested."

Phang is rigorous about updating and making the website for Phang Legal easy to use and relevant. Currently, it attracts between 600 and 1,000 people clicking through per month. To get that kind of reach offline, he says he would

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"have to be networking 24/7".

He estimates that the benefits might be long-term: "Eighty per cent of our enquiries come through the web, but that only results in 20 per cent of our professional fees," he says.

To improve that rate, he studies how people use the

net, what keywords they use. Are they typing in "cheap conveyancing", does money matter to them, or are they the more specific clients who will type in "property lawyer, Sydney"?

As he explains it, the online network works best if people feel they've got to know you a bit through your online presence.

But all of this linking and brand creation networking does take time.

Generational

Pouyan Afshar from Allens Arthur Robinson says he maintains a LinkedIn page and follows some Twitter sites, though much of the time he is too busy to do more.

But he can see the advantages: "Even in larger firms, individual partners have different expertise. They can list their expertise on LinkedIn, it's a good way of putting yourself out there," he says.

"You always need to keep yourself in the forefront of clients' minds, so when a matter comes up they know who to turn to." Each time he updates his page, an alert goes out to his network, again keeping his

name fresh.

Afshar is the president of NSW Young Lawyers but he doesn't think social networking is necessarily divided by generation.

He has seen "people who can barely type" take to the concept. However, he says, for him the most effective networking is done not through different sites, but through Young Lawyers' committee email lists, which can contain up to 500 names and which target groups of people with a shared interest in differing areas of law and practice.

Email chains are of course widely used, but these are professional lists, allowing users to post questions about difficult situations. When the email goes out, generally six or seven responses come back.

Some of those responding are doing so because they want to help, Afshar surmises, and some because they want to put their name out there. Either is valid, and it creates a community of people talking to each other.

Plus, because it's email people do respond; it's fast and easy. He thinks you wouldn't get the same response to a question posted on a blog.

It's a point confirmed by Jason Elias who says that online networks come with a built-in sense of camaraderie; from his observations, people think of a network as the people who know people they know and will respond accordingly.

But like everything with the word 'networking' attached, there are the fans and there are the detractors.

For every Ern Phang, there is a lawyer who holds back perhaps because of the risks associated with all online ventures – identity theft, defamation – perhaps just because of the horror of looking too eager. While stories trumpet the success of social networks in the US and the UK, in Australia there's a sense of dismissal, a muttering about people who need to put their photos up on Facebook.

Says Jason Elias, "Culturally, we just don't like blowing our own trumpet". □

Amruta Slee is a freelance Sydney writer.

Social networking is not necessarily divided by generation. Some people who can "barely type" take to it, says NSW Young Lawyers president, Pouyan Afshar. PHOTO: ALEX CRAIG

