

An “Old-School” Marketing Tool for Lawyers: the Internet Forum

Why use a forum to market yourself as a lawyer? At first it might seem like a mundane sort of way to advertise yourself. Forums aren't as sexy as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, or JD Supra . But posting in forums is almost always free and it's a great way to help out in community on your own time, while not actively soliciting clients. A forum automatically keeps track of how many times your topic has been read, and allows other members to comment on it. Forums allow you to get into the online game without the need for a blog program or an expensive website. There are many of the benefits of the big-name social networking sites without the need to constantly update your life status. You can do everything in a forum—it's like a one-stop shop for social networking, advertising, marketing, and social consciousness. There's groups and “buddy lists,” personal messages, links to your other social networking sites, links to your favourite causes and charities, and generally letting people know what you think. [Forums](#) may be “old-school” but they are extremely effective at getting you and your business attention and clients.

The first step is to familiarize yourself with what forums are, what they are used for, and where to find them ([Wikipedia](#)). Your next step is to choose a forum with high traffic: new posts, new members, a lot of page views per day. These stats are commonly available at the bottom of a forum page, but not always. If you can't tell how busy a certain forum is, check out <http://www.websiteoutlook.com/> for stats on any website. Once you've found one or more forums that have some respectable traffic figures, decide on what you're looking for. Are you looking to connect with other lawyers (referral business) or are you hoping to connect with potential clients (direct business), or both? If your purpose is to network with other lawyers specifically, then do a search for legal-specific forums where lawyers connect to share information and documents (sorry, don't know of any!). If your purpose is to attract new clients directly, then you should look for a question and answer forum where lawyers identify themselves in their profile and clients ask legal questions and seek guidance. In Canada, there simply are not many legal forums like this that I've come across, with the exception of www.advicescene.com. This site allows lawyers to update their profile to include social networking links (Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.), website links, a photo and contact information. That means that every time someone reads a post by you, they see your face and all the information that you've provided. This site allows you to not only answer questions, but to also post blog articles and news items as well. There is no charge (some forums charge lawyers to take questions). The site also has a free directory that you can add yourself to (<http://www.advicescene.com/lawyers/>), and a few other free and/or cost-effective marketing tools. This forum sends out tweets to thousands of Twitter followers each time someone starts a new topic. And the site is generally well-indexed by the search engines (that means that people will find your posts even if they've never heard of the forum). In the US, there are many question and answer forums based on the same principle, where lawyers can sign up for free (or for a fee) and answer questions that potential clients ask. Not many, if any, are as comprehensive as AdviceScene, and often lawyers do not identify themselves (or are not allowed to identify themselves), so their usefulness might be at question when it comes to marketing (but I could be wrong—it has happened a couple times before). AdviceScene hopes to move into the US in the very near future, so there will be another option for American lawyers that wish to market themselves this way.

Now for the question of what and [how do you post in a forum](#). The very first thing to do is to set up your profile (which will show in all your posts). You'll need a photo (usually jpg format works), any web links you want to include (like your profile page in your firm's website), a signature line (that will appear below all your posts), and all your contact information that you want to provide. To see how your profile looks in a post, try posting something as a test (some forums allow you to delete your own posts, but many don't, so make sure it's something that you don't mind others seeing). Once you're

pleased with your profile, you're ready for action.

Where to post?

It is useful to post in the most popular boards of course, and those can be determined by the number of posts and the number of reads per topic within the board (these stats are easily readable in any forum that I've come across). Post in boards that interest you, or that are directly related to one of your practice areas. Either answer other people's questions, discuss legal issues, or post your own material (blogs, news items, articles).

How to Post?

Try to always use respectful language and remain professional. You are after all representing your firm and your industry. And do keep in mind that posts you make on a forum are forever—you might as well etch them in stone somewhere! As soon as you click the post button, someone could be reading and saving it. So don't say anything that can come back to haunt you later. When it comes to legal forums where people are looking for legal information and advice, be sure to state that you are providing only general guidelines based on the information that was provided to you in the post. Even if the forum itself has disclaimers all over the place (which most do), you need to make sure that people know that what you're offering is legal information, which is very different from paid legal advice. In fact, some lawyers put a line right in their signature (on their profile) that states: “this is only legal information, for legal advice you must retain the services of a qualified lawyer” or “this is meant as legal information only and should not be construed as legal advice.” You might consider doing this just so that you don't have to hear about it in the future, even if the possibility of someone successfully suing you for incorrect legal information that they happened to read on a forum, is a very remote possibility. You won't get into any trouble if you remain professional, respectful, and you only provide legal information that anyone should be able to find anyway, if they knew where to find it.

Good luck and try not to be a [troll](#), [spammer](#), [double poster](#) or a [sock puppet](#)!

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