

BUSINESS & CAREERS

Running a legal blog takes commitment



HI-TECH

**LUIGI
BENETTON**

Have you heard of the recent flick *Julie & Julia*? It came from a book which, itself, sprouted from a blog.

The original blog (the vehicle in which the then-aspiring struggling writer Julie Powell published) contains individual posts (roughly analogous to journal entries) which became fodder for the book and movie inspired by the popular chef Julia Child.

Yet even with a Hollywood profile, prominent blawgers are asking if blawgs are in decline.

"Lawyers got to the party just as it was winding down," quips Simon Fodden, founder of über-blawg Slaw.ca, even as he says there are many more Canadian blawgs than there were even two years ago.

Rochester, N.Y.-based lawyer Nicole Black concurs, stating that blawgs (aka law blogs) peaked in 2010.

But she recalls what her blog did for her in 2005.

Coming off a three-year hiatus from law during which she had two children, Black edged her way back into the industry doing contract work for other lawyers.

At a time when blawgs weren't as common as they are today, Black started *Sui Generis* to publish her thoughts on areas of law she was familiar with. "That blog got me back out there, showed I still knew how to think like a lawyer," she says.

While not leading to her current position, of counsel with Fiandach & Fiandach, it did help raise her profile, land periodical columns and co-author books, including *Social Media for Lawyers: the Next Frontier*.

"More than anything else, it's been the networks," says Omar Ha-Redeye of blawging's benefits. "My contacts internationally have grown. That's wonderful. You never know what kind of work you'll do down the road."

Currently articling in a boutique Toronto litigation firm, he couldn't recall how many blogs he has authored or written for. "I have been approached by law firms and I haven't even been called to the Bar yet," Ha-Redeye says. (Note: it can't hurt his resume to mention "Founder: lawiscool.com.")

Fodden, Black and Ha-Redeye have clearly built value using blawgs. If you want to do the same, consider these pointers.

Do reality checks

It takes a certain type of person to care for and feed a blawg. Are you that type of person? Ask yourself the following questions to find out.



LUCIAN MILASAN / DREAMSTIME.COM

1. Do you like to write?

"You must like what you're writing about or the blawg will flop," Black says. "That's the only way to stand out."

2. Will you have time to write?

Longer, in-depth posts take time to plan, write and revise. "You have to have a real desire to blawg that makes you set aside time in your schedule to blawg," says Fodden.

Fortunately, there are shortcuts. Black spends 1.5 hours each month maintaining her Legal Antics site, where she reposts material from other places and adds her own short descriptions to posts.

If you want to post your own ideas, could you work with a ghost-blawger? Would you participate in a "group blawg" like Slaw?

3. Will you have time to read?

All great writers are voracious readers, and great blawgers are no exception. "You must find out what's out there, how it's done," Fodden advises.

Develop a vision for your blawg

What do you want to write about? Who do you want to write it for? What online conversations do you want to contribute to? How would blawging contribute to an overall firm communications strategy? What do your colleagues and managing partners think about your blawg idea? These and other questions will help you focus your blawg for the audience you want to reach.

Come up with blawg post ideas

Riff off recent court decisions. Subscribe to RSS feeds of websites your audience reads (or needs to). Read fine publications like *The Lawyers Weekly*. Ideas abound all around you, so keep pen and paper at the ready when you come across topics that fit your blawg's vision.

Choose a blogging platform

Systems like TypePad, Blogger and Wordpress let you get started

quickly. If this part proves too "techie" for you to handle, consider contracting the services of a web designer who works with blogging platforms.

"I'm not a technophile," Ha-Redeye claims. "I took courses to learn these skills."

Blawg regularly

"Regular" depends on the blawger, time constraints, objectives and other criteria. Noting that frequently updated websites catch Google's attention, Ha-Redeye recommends daily posts for blawgers who want to build their profile quickly.

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Whatever your schedule, stick to it. "It's a conversation, and if you fall asleep during the conversation too frequently, people will ignore you," Fodden says.

Write for the web

"On the web, try brevity," Ha-Redeye says. "If you're too verbose, you come off as pompous, incomprehensible."

To that end:

- Write short paragraphs
- Use bullets and subheads to help readers scan your posts
- Use hyperlinks
- Add images, audio and video clips where appropriate
- Use important keywords

This should come naturally when you write about your practice area and will help raise your blawg's profile among

search engines.

- Give legal information, not legal advice
- Review posts before you publish so you don't cross this line.
- Develop a unique voice — or not

Certain blawgers freely share opinions online, which often makes their blawgs interesting reads. But they also risk offending people like colleagues, potential clients and members of the judiciary. It's your call.

Filter and moderate comments

Yes, even blawgs get spammed. Filters (like Akismet for Wordpress) prevent the vast majority of comment spam from infesting your blog posts.

"Legitimate" comments can be double-edged. While most posts will only attract attention within the legal community and result in largely thoughtful discussion, some posts might attract wider, and sometimes unwanted, attention. That's why many blawgers have comments held for approval.

"You can get cranks, and people who comment after too much wine, and comment out of anger," Fodden says. "I usually contact the commenter to ask for comments that are less inflammatory or defamatory."

Promote your blog

- Look for ways to get the word out about your blawg.
- Don't overlook easy steps.
- Include your blawg address in your email signature, office stationery and promotional items you send to clients and prospects.
- Guest blawg.
- Invite other blawgers to contribute posts to your blawg, and offer posts to other blawgs.
- Be selective and tactful when contacting other blawgers. "First establish a rapport with the blawger. Don't just contact blawgers out of the blue and offer topics that aren't relevant to their

blawg," Black advises.

- Use other social media.

Much discussion happens on social media sites, whether open to the general public or frequented only by the legal community. If that doesn't convince you, consider this: social media has surpassed porn as the number one use of the Internet.

Start your journey to a sophisticated social media strategy using the following basic steps:

- Post your resume on LinkedIn and professional legal sites. Ensure the profile includes a link back to your blawg.
- Post notices of new blawg posts on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and other sites where you maintain a presence.
- Use software like TweetDeck or HootSuite to post to several social networking sites simultaneously.
- Participate in discussions on other blawgs.
- Use an RSS reader, like NetNewsWire or the one included in many email programs, to quickly scan multiple blawgs for new posts.

"Only 10 per cent of your activity should be promotional," Black says. "The rest should be interaction."

- Have your blawg listed in places people would expect to find it.

For Canadian lawyers, this includes LawBlogs.ca. Make sure the Slaw.ca search bar finds it. Also, contact the owners of sites used by constituencies you serve if you sincerely think those sites might benefit by linking to your blawg.

- Collaborate across other blawgs and sites.

"Traditionally, lawyers protected their work as much as possible," Ha-Redeye says. "Now it's about collaboration, even with competitors, especially if collaborators have their own websites. Cross-pollination of links enhances visibility on Google."

- Pay attention to changes in the medium.

"Lawyers are coming to blawging just at the point it may be turning into something else," Fodden says, noting the rise in popularity of other social media like Facebook and Twitter, which he calls "a useful announcement tool."

"I think something between Twitter and full-on blawging is likely to emerge," he adds.

- Continue to learn about blawging.

You can't learn everything you need to know about blawging from a few months' experience, much less one article. Keep reading great blawgs and make time to learn what they have to teach. ■

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