

Get By With A Little Help From Your Friends

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Consumers have a wealth of Web-based resources available to them for finding, comparing and hiring experts in virtually any field. Google and other horizontal search engines are the places where most begin their search.

"Insiders" and savvy consumers go to industry-specific websites to find more focused information. For instance in the medical field, sites like WebMD offer news, information, communities and tools that educate consumers and help them locate doctors. The site also offers separate portals for medical professionals to help them deepen their clinical knowledge and make more informed benefit, treatment and provider decisions.

Similarly, a plethora of online legal resources have sprung up in recent years, some offering directories of lawyers and law firms, others providing ratings and other data, and others seeking to create online networks for legal professionals. Clearly there is a need, particularly within corporate legal departments, for convenient online access to credible information on legal issues. There is also demand for online tools that enable corporate counsel to expand their professional network and obtain lawyer and law firm referrals from trusted peers as shrinking budgets and growing demands on their time limit opportunities for one-on-one networking.

Use Of Online Professional Networks

Online professional networks are growing in popularity within the legal community, but there is the sense that existing solutions aren't quite up to the task. The 2008 Networks for Counsel Survey commissioned by LexisNexis® Martindale-Hubbell® revealed interesting data about the use and perceptions of online networks within the legal community:

- Nearly 50 percent of lawyers are members of online social networks but 43 percent of corporate counsel and 53 percent of private practice lawyers said that current versions of professional networks do not help them work more efficiently and cost effectively.

- According to the study, the most important features and content that counsel are looking for in a professional legal network are –

1. Access to information not found anywhere else;
2. Ease of exchanging information/experiences with their peers;
3. Ability to identify, evaluate and select private practice lawyers quickly;
4. Ability to find the "right" lawyer directly; and
5. Speed of collaboration.

Despite their dissatisfaction with existing professional networks, demand is growing for an online solution created specifically for lawyers that will enable them to expand their peer network; gain access to trusted content as well as comprehensive data, ratings and commentary about lawyers and law firms; and take advantage of Web 2.0 tools and solutions that facilitate online information sharing and collaboration. The ability to do all of this via a single, trusted, online destination would be an incredibly powerful and effi-

cient resource for counsel.

Martindale-Hubbell is working to fill this void by leveraging the industry's most established and comprehensive legal directory and adding dynamic and interactive Web 2.0 capabilities to launch Martindale-Hubbell Connected (MH Connected) in February 2009.

The Future Of Legal Networking

The launch of MH Connected is part of a multimillion dollar effort to transform martindale.com into a global, interactive, online community designed specifically for legal professionals. MH Connected is a secure networking platform – all new users must be authenticated by Martindale-Hubbell – focused on helping corporate counsel deepen their professional knowledge, create collaborative communities and improve decision making abilities, such as when selecting outside counsel. The site enables users to expand their professional network by uncovering new relationships, gain access to the most relevant content for their needs, share information and insights, and collaborate on legal issues in a virtual community with fellow lawyers. Special tools will also be available on MH Connected to help corporate counsel manage their outside counsel relationships more efficiently and cost-effectively.

Like any good networking tool, MH Connected proactively suggests obvious connections to users by matching one's career and educational background with the full database of more than one million lawyers in the martindale.com directory. In a recent independent report on MH Connected published by the technology analyst firm Outsell, David Curle, director and lead analyst noted, "By linking its networking platform into its existing directory content, Martindale is providing a set of ready-made connections to virtually every practicing lawyer in North America and many more internationally."

MH Connected also mines court documents to identify less obvious but potentially useful connections between a member and other lawyers he or she has teamed with or faced in court.

A new agreement with LinkedIn provides users with yet another means of surfacing relationships within martindale.com. When searching martindale.com for lawyers, users will see LinkedIn icons within the profiles of attorneys who are members of that network. If the martindale.com user is also a member of LinkedIn, he or she can access the LinkedIn connection with the designated lawyer by clicking on the LinkedIn icon. Doing so presents the user with information about the person, as well as common LinkedIn connections between the user and the lawyer. This combination of resources offers users the broadest possible network of potentially useful connections from both inside and outside the legal community to those who can provide valuable referrals and feedback on firms and lawyers a user is thinking of hiring.

Each week hundreds of new users are joining MH Connected, currently in beta, in advance of the site's official launch. Corporate counsel can join MH Connected at www.martindale.com/connected and take advantage of the full features and functionality at no charge.

Beyond Networking

Beyond enabling users to make more strategic connections, the MH Connected platform offers resources and management

tools to deliver additional business value. Users have access to content drawn from multiple sources including LexisNexis, as well as user-generated content contributed by trusted peers, third-party data and statistics such as U.S. federal civil litigation activity, M&A transactions and U.S.-granted patents, as well as counsel-created research, competitor profiles, marketing trends, referrals, online events/forums and other resources. Users will also be able to create controlled-access interest groups within MH Connected based on their own criteria and join broader MH Connected communities created by others.

Later in 2009, each MH Connected member who works in-house will be able to create a personal preferred provider list that will become part of the member's standard MH Connected dashboard. The dashboard feature will help corporate legal departments better manage and collaborate with preferred providers and identify colleagues who have actually worked with these firms.

There is no substitute for first-hand knowledge or referrals from trusted peers when evaluating lawyers/firms in unfamiliar jurisdictions, geographies or areas of practice. Sometimes, however, there are just too many "degrees of separation" between you and the kind of objective information you need to perform your due diligence. The Internet offers access to seemingly limitless amounts of information about outside counsel with expertise in specific jurisdictions and areas of practice. The harder task lies in performing an "apples to apples" comparison between firms and identifying a short list of candidates who appear to offer the best fit based on their ability, reputation, experience, cost, commitment to client service, and other relevant criteria, both objective and subjective.

Martindale.com enables easy, side-by-side comparisons between lawyers and firms based on staff credentials, practice areas, matter experience, office locations and more. Ratings and rankings offer another useful source of third-party commentary that facilitates these kinds of comparisons and enables counsel to assess marketplace perception of ability and other important factors.

Lawyer Ratings And Rankings

There are plenty of ratings systems out there, but no single system measures all relevant factors and provides an objective and credible ratings scorecard for all lawyers and law firms. Martindale.com is transforming its own ratings system and providing easier access to other highly credible, third-party data, rankings and commentary.

Martindale-Hubbell Peer Review Ratings™ have been the industry standard for more than 100 years and are the only ratings system endorsed by the American Bar Association. Peer Review Ratings provide a credible measure of a lawyer's ethical standards and professional legal ability. However, the team at Martindale-Hubbell is updating the Peer Review Ratings system in response to market feedback.

Beginning in 2009, the familiar AV, BV, and CV ratings system will be enhanced to include ratings by practice area, additional questions on legal ability, a narrative feedback component and much more. In addition, the new Peer Review Ratings system will be updated more frequently to provide a more current peer assessment of a lawyer's abilities and eth-

ical standards.

While legal professionals are more qualified than most to offer assessments of their peers' legal abilities, in a research study conducted for LexisNexis Martindale-Hubbell by an independent research consultancy, corporate counsel told us they also want to hear opinions offered by clients who have worked directly with lawyers and firms counsel may wish to hire. Let's face it, if you want to know what it's going to be like working with a particular firm, their clients are better equipped than anyone to provide this insight.

Martindale.com launched Client Review in mid-2008, providing a forum for clients to offer anonymous feedback on lawyers and firms with whom they've worked. Reviews are currently being collected and will begin to be displayed in 2009. Submission of a review requires that the client respondent represent that he/she or his/her employer has been a client of the law firm/lawyer and that he/she is completing the review on matters that are no longer pending. It is important to note that Martindale-Hubbell does not undertake to develop Client Reviews for all firms. Therefore, the fact that a lawyer has not been reviewed should not be construed unfavorably.

Another key development in the ratings transformation at martindale.com is a new relationship with Chambers & Partners announced in November. Beginning in February 2009, visitors to martindale.com will be able to access Chambers rankings and commentary on lawyers and law firms throughout the world. Chambers & Partners, a highly respected London-based company, provides independent rankings that assess technical legal ability, professional conduct, client service, commercial awareness, diligence, commitment and other qualities valued by clients.

Visitors to martindale.com will see a Chambers & Partners icon next to profiles of lawyers and law firms that have been recognized with a ranking from Chambers. Clicking on this icon will open a window linked to the Chambers website showing rankings and editorial commentary.

Complementing the updated Martindale-Hubbell Peer Review Ratings and the recently launched Client Review feature on martindale.com, the addition of the widely recognized rankings by Chambers & Partners is part of a larger effort by Martindale-Hubbell to enhance its website with third-party insights and intelligence. This combination of resources will give users a 360-degree view of more than a million lawyers worldwide and will help legal buyers to find, evaluate and select counsel.

Conclusion

Professional networking sites and Web 2.0 technologies offer an effective means to broaden counsel's professional network, improve workflow efficiency, and collaborate and seek referrals from trusted contacts who share similar concerns and challenges. However, not all professional networking sites are created equal. Look for a community created exclusively for legal professionals built by a company that truly understands the unique challenges facing corporate counsel.

Joining the right professional networking site won't solve all your problems, but it will give you access to exactly the kinds of resources you'll need to stay afloat as corporate legal departments are asked to do more with less in the months ahead.

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