
Business gets social

By Ottawa Business Journal Staff
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On a cold March day last year, Ian Hull and Suzana Popovic-Montag sat down together and did something they'd never done before. They recorded their own "radio show" on issues relating to their legal specialty of estate and succession planning. Fifteen months later, their podcast and blog have positioned Toronto-based Hull and Hull LLP as a leader in their field. And that's yielded direct results for their business.

"We are a boutique Estate Litigation firm and much of our work comes from other lawyers, estate planners, accountants and financial planners," says Ian Hull. "The blogs and podcasts are like a constant stream of what we used to think of as "a newsletter" to these sources. Also the general public have embraced our web page. Last month I had a new client call me and they started off by saying: 'I have been reading your blog for the last month and I know your firm is the right place for me to come to.'"

Hull and Popovic-Montag are in the vanguard of a revolution in the way that businesses interact with their customers. Social media – blogs, podcasts, video blogs and wikis – are making it possible for businesses to develop meaningful, long-term relationships with their customers, employees and stakeholders.

"The benefits are twofold," offers Ian Hull. "First, as a law firm we have positioned ourselves as true 'knowledge delivery innovators'. Second, the process of blogging and Podcasting gives all of the members of the firm the opportunity to learn and refine our services. You always learn a topic better when you have to teach it to others."

But there are millions of Websites. How can a smaller firm like Hull and Hull compete with its bigger competitors? Surely they dominate in this new medium just as they do in main stream media advertising? If you can't compete with your giant competitor's advertising budget on television, how can you compete on the Web?

The answer lies in how people find content on the Web. If you're like most people, you don't type in a page's address in your Browser window. Instead, you type a search term into a search engine, most likely Google.

Google has become the new "front page." Businesses have long understood the value of advertising in the most widely-read newspaper or the Yellow pages. Today, they understand that they must also rate high in Google's search results.

Why is it important to rate high in Google's search results? Think about your own habits. When you search for something, how often do you click on one of the links on the front page and how often do you bother to go to the second or even the third page of search results before clicking on a link?

Blogs and podcasts are by their nature very search engine friendly. The frequency of updates and links into the site from other blogs will rapidly drive your site to the top of Google's search results.



Now, let's go back to Ian Hull. A search in Google for either "Toronto estate law" or "Toronto wills" turns up Hull and Hull's Estate Law blog on the first page of both searches. Right where any business would want to be. And well ahead of the behemoth hundred-partner firms. And why is that? Because Ian Hull and his partners produce interesting content about their area of expertise several times a week.

Small businesses stand on even ground with large businesses when it comes to quality content that will drive links and frequency of posts. Small businesses tend to be close to their market and their community. They often have owner operators for whom their business is their passion. What better formula for interesting content could you have than someone who speaks or writes about their passion? They're likely to be well informed and to have a distinct point of view. That's the kind of distinct perspective that attracts readers. And that's the kind of quality that the largest businesses have difficulty creating.

Every day businesses spend thousands of dollars trying to reach potential customers through advertisements in mainstream media – television, radio, and newspapers. And for their thousands of dollars, their ad will be seen by thousands of readers. But for most businesses, how many of those people are actually interested in the product or service? For most advertising, it's like sowing seeds in a field of rocks. The vast majority of disinterested readers are the rocks – and they greatly outnumber the group of readers who may actually be interested in what you are advertising at the time your ad appears.

With social media, the number of people who will read a blog post or listen to a podcast is much smaller. But those who read or listen are doing so because they are genuinely interested in the topic. This means that they are that much closer to sending an email or picking up the phone to ask for help. And as any salesperson will tell you, the people you want to talk to are those who have decided that they need what you have to sell.

So, should you consider blogging or podcasting for your business? Ian Hull thinks so. "Start now, and don't stop. Don't be afraid to give some meaningful information away for free as it will come back to you in new fee paying business tenfold."

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Join Joe Thornley at his *Best Practices in Social Media* (<http://comcec.com/private/corporatemedias.html>) workshop on Oct. 2 at the Centre for Excellence in Communications (www.comcec.com)

Joseph Thornley writes about social media and business at www.propr.ca The Hull and Hull podcasts and blog can be found at <http://estatelaw.hullandhull.com/>

