

Technology

LAW PRACTICE

TECHNOLOGY IN PRACTICE. WHAT WORKS? WHO GETS IT?

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TECH PROFILE

Sabrina Pacifici

Identifying the intended audience—your community of readers—is especially important. Why are you blogging, who do you want to reach, and what is the purpose of your work?

Turn the page for the story of this innovating legal technologist and researcher.

TECHNOLOGY SNAPSHOT

Online Project Collaboration

As most of us know, getting a project in the bag requires good communication and collaboration—but the communicating and collaborating are often the hardest part. For an online assist, you might check out Basecamp, at www.basecampHQ.com. It's a unique but simple Web-based project collaboration tool. Basecamp makes it easy to centralize group communication with co-workers and clients using tools that assign to-dos and tasks, post messages and gather feedback, and do simple scheduling and permissions. It also has mechanisms for sharing files internally or with clients and for tracking people's time on given tasks. The site currently has more than 500,000 users. Business plan prices range from \$24 to \$149 per month.



Photo Credit: Michael Schmitt, Evanston, IL

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Who Is ...

Sabrina Pacifici

Q&A with Mark Tamminga

VITAL STATISTICS

- ➔ Sabrina I. Pacifici
- ➔ Publisher, Editor and Web Manager
- ➔ LLRX.com and beSpacific.com
- ➔ Silver Spring, MD
- ➔ www.llrx.com and www.bespacific.com



Sabrina Pacifici has a passion for publishing content-rich material on the Web. She's the creator of, and prolific contributor to, LLRX.com, one of the most highly touted legal research sites. Now in its 10th year, it attracts more than 120,000 unique readers each month. Each issue showcases the latest links to new services, technologies and resources, as well as commentary on issues at the nexus of law and technology—an impressive achievement for a one-person operation. But consider that she's also the creator of the highly touted blog beSpacific, which provides daily law and technology news, and her achievements become even more impressive. Here's her story.

You saw at a very early stage technology's possibilities for publishing your own content. How did that come about?

SP: I think I was born with the research gene, if there is such a thing. Throughout all stages of my education, I made extensive use of libraries and the many professional services they offered, which

included access to a range of online systems. So my passion for research is what took me into the world of technology, long before I decided to become a librarian and technologist. That came about in parallel ways.

While I was a college student, studying philosophy and religion, I worked as a research assistant for a professor and learning how to effectively use the library's collection and its reference services was a tremendous asset. This experience put me on a path that I am still following.

One of the first large-scale projects in which I participated was the conversion of my college library from the Dewey to the LC classification system. That led me to learn how to use an online service called OCLC, which has evolved considerably over the decades and remains a key resource for researchers, regardless of their respective disciplines. As a researcher, I saw then that the challenge was—and still remains—to create a pathfinder for each project, comprised of a range of reliable sources, techniques, tools and services that together form the foundation for completing projects in a comprehensive, accurate and clearly defined manner.

I became a publisher in 1989, when I launched the journal *PLL Perspectives*, which I designed and edited as well. It was a 24-page quarterly association journal, which I created using the desktop publishing program PageMaker. On top of that, I solicited ads to cover costs

and distributed it to the membership around the country, all on a volunteer basis. Then in 1996, I decide to make the transition to the Web with a non-affiliated publication, also of my own creation, which I named *Law Library Resource Xchange*. This Web journal has for some years been commonly known by its URL, LLRX.com.

I made the transition from print publishing because I believed that the Web offered a new, dynamic alternative to print, and that it would allow me to expand a publication's reach from a limited community of distribution to a community not limited by geographic location, association membership or job title. The Web offered greater opportunities for sharing and spotlighting the expertise of my colleagues in the quickly evolving and expanding arena of law and technology-related issues and research. A decade later, I can say with confidence that it was the right choice. I am so grateful that my friends and colleagues supported me back in 1996 when I took a big leap "outside the box," and that they are still with me as I am poised to move forward into my second decade on the Web.

As a law librarian, you were introduced to online research and communication technologies earlier than most. When did you begin to see the implications for legal practice?

SP: I made a conscious decision to work with computers from the beginning of my career. They have always

impressed me as flexible, efficient (albeit challenging) tools to organize and make information accessible to facilitate more effective research. I requested a computer when I started a job with a D.C.-based firm in 1982, and when I moved to a leading global law firm a few years later, at the outset of what was to be my 21-year tenure, I asked for computers for my entire department. I placed “walk-up” PCs in the library as well, reviewed and purchased low-cost programs and applications, and set about the task of creating online pathfinders and topical databases to provide a wider range of research services to the firm.

I began using the Internet for research and communication before the advent of the World Wide Web. In the days before the graphical Web interface, there were Gopher servers replete with data that was searchable using finding tools such as Veronica and Jughead. We made extensive use of listserve postings to assist with research projects and information-sharing efforts. I continue to use listserves on a daily basis for the same tasks.

Interestingly, the underlying mainstays of the technology, such as listserves and e-mail, have remained integral to our work over the course of more than two decades. When I publish a new issue of LLRX.com, for example, I post information about the articles to more than a dozen professional listserves, as well as syndicating the news via RSS feeds. E-mail messages about LLRX content flow around the world and update thousands of regular readers in countries outside the United States, including in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, France, Singapore and the Middle East. Communication still involves a two-

way dialogue, and e-mail—despite its drawbacks—remains an effective and vital way of reaching professional communities around the globe.

It was with the adoption of Windows 95 that I saw the possibility of using the graphical Web to create pathfinders and tools for research. I did this during the summer of 1995 when I set up a pioneering law firm intranet using Netscape bookmarks. After learning basic HTML, I replaced the bookmarks with icon-driven groupings that linked to legal and nonlegal topical resources on the Web. The result was a search guide that

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allowed seamless navigation between the firm’s internal content and the Web’s resources. A decade ago, there was not the voluminous amount of content now available online, so this was a manageable task that resulted in an immediate success. The Web guide linked only to reliable sources such as search engines, government sites and academic sources, and it was an effective tool to manage the transition to an online content source that was so distinct from subscription services such as Lexis or Westlaw.

As the Web quickly expanded and became a more important research destination, the concept of using an external site to disseminate information from the law firm to the public

became more attractive as well. If we were linking to resources on the Web, other researchers might be interested in information we could distribute online. In 1998, I developed and launched what may have been the first law firm-sponsored site focused on cyberlaw issues, for which I was Web manager for eight years. The site won praise from many sources.

The next step was blogging. I designed and implemented what was probably the first enterprise blogging project at one of the world’s largest full-service law firms in 2003. I created a number of practice and topic-specific blogs there. These internal sites, for which I was the sole manager and blogger, were available behind the firewall at all desktops firmwide and were updated through the course of each day.

I am very excited by the impact that blogs are making in research and the legal profession. Blogs are a multifaceted tool, and they can serve a significant role in assisting with the dynamic process of meeting a range of goals and objectives for librarians and lawyers in a variety of areas. Blogs are flexible applications, and can be scaled as appropriate, but provide the most value only if they are consistently updated and comprise focused content. Thus, they may not be the right choice for every setting, project or individual.

In weighing the decision to launch or participate in a blog, there are several important factors, including determining if the format offers the requisite criteria, then establishing a level of comfort with the features of the application you choose and, in following, making a commitment to consistently add reliable, well-sourced, new data and information. Also, identifying the

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intended audience—your community of readers—is especially important. Why are you blogging, who do you want to reach, and what is the purpose of your work? All should be reviewed in advance.

LLRX.com and beSpacific.com have both become invaluable resources for the legal community. Can you describe their evolution for us?

SP: LLRX.com was my entry point to the Web and, again, it was a logical next step after gaining proficiency in desktop publishing. Initially I published it twice a month and then moved to monthly in 2003. The change in frequency hasn't reduced the content. In fact, the actual volume of content published per month has increased over time. The content is authored by a group of terrific librarians, lawyers, information pros and journalists who contribute columns each month, as well as authors who provide feature content. Importantly, many of the readers also become the authors, so the community is self-sustaining.

The site now has a searchable database of more than 1,600 articles dating back to 1996. The article topics include practice area research; legislative research; reviews of hardware, software, gadgets and accessories; and legal technology such as knowledge management, e-discovery, intranets, Web and database searching. There are also presentations, pathfinders and guides on a wide range of topics, from competitive intelligence to business and corporate research to foreign and comparative law. Other categories include how to research particular areas of U.S. law and legal marketing from both a librarian and a lawyer perspective.

LLRX also hosts the only free,

searchable, comprehensive and regularly updated database of court rules, forms and dockets on the Web, comprising over 1,400 entries.

As to beSpacific, which I started in August 2002, I was intrigued with the concept of blogging and had been doing the equivalent of it on the Newsstand section of LLRX. The Newsstand had regular updates on news about research and technology of interest to the library and legal community. Blog software offered me a more dynamic and comprehensive tool for publishing and compiling information that readers could more easily read as well as search. I also liked that blogging was an efficient mechanism for chronicling related information on specific issues, as well as tracking and monitoring issues and topics as they evolve. I decided to focus on a core group of topics that were of interest to me that would warrant daily updates. Like LLRX, my goal for beSpacific was to create and sustain a site that was reliable, content-rich, current and focused. The blog currently has a searchable database of more than 11,000 postings.

There are about a dozen and a half topics that I blog on regularly. I spend a couple of hours a day researching core issues in the arena of law and technology, such as freedom of information, access to government documents, privacy, legislation and regulations, cybercrime and ID theft. I do considerable research every evening to locate and vet, substantiate and link to documents about these issues, to keep myself, and the community of readers, updated and current. My emphasis is always on primary documents and resources that are below the surface—deep links—including government documents and source materials from academics, public interest groups and NGOs. I don't feel my

role is to comment on this data, but to make sure that notable, credible, reliable documents are brought to the readers' attention. Also, I strive to maintain the site as a vertical research tool—in effect, a relational database where information about a specific topic yields not just one posting, but an aggregated and associated set of relevant resources that provide perspective on an issue, as well as context.

I can honestly say that I never tire of it. The energy I draw from working on these online publications is not draining. It is sustaining. It is a lot of work, but I couldn't imagine not doing it.

Lawyers are pretty used to being kicked around as technology rubes and late adopters. Do you think that assessment is accurate or, instead, a dated generalization that is rapidly being proven wrong?

SP: Whether it is in a solo practice or a large firm, you'll find a wide range of skills and interests. Many lawyers with whom I've worked and with whose work I am familiar have been at the cutting edge of using technology, including KM, e-discovery and litigation support applications, as well as blogs, podcasts and Web 2.0 applications. As in any profession, there are individuals and groups who are ahead of the curve, and the legal profession has many prominent individuals who are tremendously talented in leveraging technology as it applies to practicing law and marketing their respective expertise. I'm fortunate that my career has brought me into contact with so many who appreciate and implement technology to the benefit of clients and community. **LP**

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