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Network News: The Challenge of "Current Awareness" in Today's Law Library

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The whole world has changed. That might sound like hyperbole, but in fact -- when it comes to current awareness -- it is true. There was a time when periodicals came into the library, the appropriate routing slip was attached, and the material was shipped off to interested patrons via inter-office mail for the trip around the firm. Sometimes these materials came back (and were then filed for archival purposes) or, more often than not, they never quite made it through the routing cycle before they were taken home, lost, or buried in a stack somewhere, never to be seen again. Your ability to keep up with the latest news in your area of law was only as real as your position on the routing slip. The further down you were, the less likely you were to get the material in a timely manner. The good news? As you moved up in the firm's pecking order, you got a better chance of moving up the routing slip!

But the old print paradigm met some new obstacles in the modern age. Aside from the logistical problem of routing periodicals (which became a problem shortly after Gutenberg invented the moveable-type printing press), law firms themselves have changed. As firms have grown in size, so has the number of attorneys needing access to this information, which often means adding additional print copies. And, as law firms expand into other offices, including internationally, this can mean duplicating resources many times over. From a practical standpoint, it has become much more difficult to deliver current awareness information in printed format in a timely and cost-effective matter, which is the goal of every law firm library. Add into the mix the fact that attorneys now expect to have immediate access to relevant materials at remote locations, such as court or their home office, and print simply becomes untenable.

Enter the electronic newsletter. The advantages are obvious: immediate distribution to interested attorneys regardless of where they are located (and regardless of their place in the pecking order). Searchable archives are far superior to thumbing through hard copy to locate an article an attorney thinks he or she saw in the last few weeks (assuming that particular issue made it back from routing.) But even this perfect solution comes with some challenges: Often the price can be significantly more than the print (the argument being that many more people could have access to the title than would have access to a single print copy), and should you decide to discontinue your electronic subscription, you also lose access to the archival materials. Still, delivering this information electronically has made it easier to meet the information needs of the modern law firm.

In addition to full-text periodicals, however, "current awareness" also involves the Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), which means delivering *targeted* information into the hands of attorneys. SDI has become even more important in light of the information explosion, which has brought with it easy access to more raw

data than can humanly be absorbed. Attorneys, increasingly under pressure to deliver more billable hours, simply do not have the time to sort through an onslaught of materials to find the information relevant to their particular clients, transactions, trials, etc. Current awareness, then, needs to be focused to deliver exactly the right information, at the right time, and at the right price.

Certainly online databases have helped libraries meet the demand for SDI. Tools such as LexisNexis® Alert, or Westlaw's® Westclip can effectively deliver this information. Even these tools, however, are not always sufficient to meet the demands of larger law firms. (These results are usually limited to one, two, or three recipients. In order to be within copyright compliance, many firms have had to set up duplicative Alerts or Westclips to ensure that everyone interested gets access to this information.) Both LexisNexis® Publisher and Thomson West's® Westlaw Watch are enterprise-wide solutions that can more effectively deliver this type of information – both to a larger group of email recipients as well as to the firm's intranet or portal.

Other current awareness tools are also available: LexisNexis® Clipper, for example, can deliver targeted information in an electronic newsletter format for distribution within the law firm. Talk about a brave new world: Imagine a trial team receiving an electronic newsletter every morning that contains not only relevant cases, regulations, and news articles on the topic, but also press releases from the client and updates from blogs. This newsletter is also easy to navigate and easy to scan, so attorneys can jump directly to the sections that pertain to them.

There is still a place for printed materials, of course, but for keeping current, there are certainly better options. Current awareness is only going to grow in importance in today's law firm, as the legal market gets more competitive. Those law firms that can harness the power of information and capitalize on the opportunities it uncovers will succeed. Those firms that fail to recognize this will not.