Beyond current awareness: sharing the right stuff
Beyond current awareness: sharing the right stuff

By Joanna Goodman in association with Thomson Reuters

Current awareness keeps law firms and their clients ahead of the curve – and the competition. In order to give their clients the best advice, law firms need to make sure that their lawyers are informed about the latest news, legal developments and decisions – as well as keeping an eye on the competition. Forward-thinking firms are increasingly using content aggregation and publishing software that collates the latest information from multiple sources to produce timely, relevant, value-added updates and bulletins.

Information updates and bulletins are an important part of firms’ knowledge and business development functions, alerting lawyers and clients to news, legislation and legal decisions that affect their practices, clients and industry sectors and thereby promoting their own expertise and value add. In today’s competitive legal services market, firms require efficient and cost-effective ways of producing regular value-added updates on multiple topics.

In some cases this is a significant publishing operation. Larger firms regularly produce around 100 daily and weekly bulletins on sectors, practice areas, companies/core clients and specific cases. Some of these are internal updates, while others are client facing. Until recently most of them have done this manually, using painstaking online research processes.

Firms are increasingly looking to replace labour-intensive processes with automatic content aggregation and publishing software to produce and distribute updates quickly and efficiently without compromising on content or the quality and speed of production. Bulletin Pro from Thomson Reuters is the latest offering in the legal content aggregation and publishing space, bringing together Thomson Reuters and third party news, information and legal resources with cutting edge auto-publishing software. Bulletin Pro collects content from multiple sources and facilitates editorial production and distribution scheduling. Although Bulletin Pro is platform agnostic when it comes to sourcing relevant content, it complements and benefits from Thomson Reuters strength in legal publishing and software.

Current awareness: a critical success factor

Law firms recognise current awareness as a critical success factor and this is reflected by the large number of daily and weekly updates they produce.

Internal publications are generally produced by a relatively small team from the library, research and/or knowledge function, supported by professional support lawyers (PSLs), while client facing updates tend to be managed by the business development team. Responsibility for internal bulletins varies by practice area and sector, depending on the size and geographical spread of the group. For example larger practices may have dedicated PSLs and also get fee earners and trainees involved, while others will rely on a centralised support function. Production volume is limited by the size and workload of the business support functions.

Typically, each bulletin includes content from numerous online sources. These include publicly available resources, such as general news websites, legal
sector publications and news websites, government websites and resources, free and paid subscriptions and alerts, including Practical Law, Westlaw UK and Lawtel, other legal publishers such as LexisNexis as well as specialist publishers and trade journals and in some cases blogs and social media feeds covering particular topics. Firms also check out their peers in the legal services sector, including law firms and consultancies. As different organisations share information in various ways – either proactively via email alerts and RSS feeds, or passively via their websites – once the content is collected it has to be reformatted into a template before being published and distributed. For passive sources, it is important to check the sites regularly and ensure that any content republished or linked to in bulletins and updates is genuinely current.

As firms produce multiple updates for different sector and practice groups, the same sources are often checked several times; for example, a news story or legal decision in the consumer sector might be relevant content for numerous bulletins.

Once the content has been collated, there is usually some editorial input. As well as creating a template for consistent style and formatting, this can range from deciding on the running order of a list of abstracts and links and adjusting headlines and keywords to adding commentary from lawyers and knowledge professionals and links to relevant internal content. This varies according to the firm’s overall approach to current awareness, and to the practice area or sector being covered.

Carrying out this process manually – checking email updates, RSS feeds and websites, selecting the relevant content and bringing it into a Word template or other publishing software – can become time-consuming and repetitive, particularly when producing numerous frequent updates covering multiple dynamic and interrelated topics.

The same applies to distribution. Current awareness is generally published via the firm’s intranet and lawyers can subscribe to email alerts.

**Common bottlenecks and pain points**

Interviews with several firms identified common issues that they are facing around creating and disseminating current awareness:

- Labour-intensive, repetitive processes to produce multiple updates are taking up too much time.

  “We have limited resources to pull in information from a growing body of specialist legal and industry sources.”

  “We follow manual, labour-intensive processes – which represent a significant cost for law firms that charge and bill by time. We need a system that will pay for itself by saving time.”

  “Cutting and pasting information into Word templates is a nightmare as you have to reformat everything.”

  “Automating some aspects of bulletin production will allow us to make better use of our small team and allow [the library and research function] to take on additional responsibilities.”
The same content is repackaged for different internal (lawyers) and external (clients) readerships. Strategically, firms have become more sector-focused. Firms are conscious of the need to avoid duplicating efforts.

“We are looking at becoming more efficient at producing our bulletins and reducing duplication to account for the crossover between industry sectors and practice areas.”

“We revisit the same sources daily. Automating the process will allow us to tag the same content for different updates.”

“We would like to bring everything into one place for people [producing bulletins and updates] to look at, check and redistribute in an easier way that meets readers’ needs.”

“There are different terms and conditions attached to republishing from different sources, so putting together updates can be a painstaking process.”

A lack of consistency between updates produced by and for different practice areas and audiences in terms of scheduling, content and look and feel.

“At the moment, different functions produce and publish bulletins in different ways using their own Word templates. If everyone used the same tool and methodology it would be easier for people to cover for each other, and ultimately move to automatic scheduling and publishing.”

Email/information overload

“We send out daily, weekly and monthly bulletins and people set up their own alerts too. We hope to minimise the number of alerts that people get.”

“If we auto-schedule updates, people can sign up to receive only the alerts that they want.”

**Content aggregation software**

Consequently, many firms are using or considering using content aggregation and publishing software to automate at least part of the process with a view to saving time and avoiding duplicating efforts, particularly in the arduous process of gathering and collating information for multiple updates.

Software requirements include a straightforward user interface – so that different groups and individuals within the firm can put together, edit and distribute bulletins for internal and external use without having to learn complex processes; the ability to incorporate in one place content from email updates, RSS feeds and websites including public sources, free and paid subscriptions and social media and add in extra content in terms of headlines, keywords and commentary from fee earners and PSLs. Firms are looking to achieve visual consistency, with a recognisable format for all bulletins; and the ability to distribute updates via multiple platforms and systems – intranet, email, RSS etc. The end user experience also needs to be simple, yet flexible, allowing lawyers and others to adjust the topics and frequency of the bulletins they subscribe to as they may wish to change these according to the cases and projects they are working on.
How Bulletin Pro streamlines the publication process

Bulletin Pro automatically collects information about particular topics from multiple sources and platforms. Internal teams can then modify and personalise the content to specific audiences, adding extra information and guidance, sometimes created within the firm, and setting publication and distribution schedules.

Defining topics and sources to create bespoke updates

The starting point for publication is to understand the audience. What do lawyers want to know and how often do they need to receive news and information? KM and BD teams are well aware of this because they are used to working closely with fee earners and assembling updates manually. The next step is to define and schedule searches that target specific resources and check them at appropriate intervals. These include publicly available resources including websites, RSS feeds and social media as well as free and paid subscription services and internal systems.

The results are then collected into a ‘topic’ and one or more topics can be used to create a bulletin.

Lynne Jones, head of the library and research centre at Lewis Silkin deployed Bulletin Pro to automate the manual process that her team were previously following. “We knew which sites we were checking regularly as we subscribed to RSS feeds and had email alerts set up to check other sites manually,” she explains.

As Jones observes, this is straightforward for specific topics such as ‘employment’ but becomes more complex for practice areas and sectors affected by different types of news and insights. Lewis Silkin’s media, brands and technology practice covers brand management, reputation management, defamation, data protection, intellectual property and copyright.

Furthermore email updates and RSS feeds are not always sufficiently specific, so not all the information will be relevant to a particular practice group or sector. “This means that we will always have to review the aggregated content and decide which information to include,” says Jones. “This enables us to add value to the information rather than simply setting up a series of searches. The more tailored the bulletins are, the more value they provide to our lawyers and teams.”

Bulletin Pro’s flexible system enables multiple topics to be assembled into a single bulletin, or for different combinations of topics to be collated into separate bulletins. This saves considerable time. For example one of Lewis Silkin’s bulletins includes updates on 29 different companies. “We used to have to check 29 separate websites for the latest developments,” explains Jones. “Now that we have set up the topics on Bulletin Pro, we simply look at what the searches pull in and select the content for publication.” Bulletin managers can review and edit the content collected into each topic as well as adding extra content so that each bulletin is tailored to its internal or external readership.

Bulletin Pro dispenses with the need to revisit sources. Topics can be reused in different bulletins with each bulletin manager/editor adjusting the content as necessary – so what might be a headline in one bulletin could be further down the list of contents in another, depending on its relevancy to each particular audience. Current awareness is not limited to practice or sector-specific updates; it also involves looking at the intersection between different practices and
sectors, allowing the firm to give its clients contextual and specific advice that closely reflects the nature of their business, their legal requirements and the industry sector(s) in which they operate.

**Streamlining the publication process**

Deduplicating the efforts required to produce updates and bulletins streamlines the publication process, reduces production costs and frees up business support professionals to produce more updates and concentrate on the value-added elements of the process. Automated searches and content aggregation helps to enhance the competitive advantage provided by current awareness as bulletin managers have time to identify and select for publication the information that genuinely adds value to clients – both directly by providing useful client updates, and indirectly by making sure lawyers have the latest information at their fingertips to provide the best and most relevant advice.

**Accuracy, consistency – and flexibility**

In common with other firms, having decided which content to include in an update, Jones and her team previously cut and pasted content into Word templates. This is time consuming as everything needs to be reformatted to achieve a consistent look and feel. Regular automatic checking of particular website feeds minimises the risk of missing important news items that are published between updates. “Having set up the search topics and frequency, content aggregation becomes a relatively hands-off process,” says Jones.

Updates and bulletins require some editorial input before they are published – this can vary in terms of tailoring the content to the audience and ranges from simply selecting the most pertinent content to include and putting it in a particular order to adding expert commentary and guidance. The ability to modify the content itself would depend on the conditions attached to republishing it, but it is possible for fee earners and others to add separate commentary for example on why a particular case or decision impacted on a practice area, sector or client company. In terms of scheduling, this also means publishing content in ways that allow subscribers to choose the length and frequency of the updates they receive. For example, some lawyers or clients might prefer to receive a short daily update while others would prefer a longer weekly bulletin. Basically it is about understanding how your readership consumes the information.

Bulletin Pro’s scheduling capability for gathering and collating information from various sources, pulling it into templates and then publishing and distributing can save knowledge, research and BD departments significant time which can be put to use adding value to the information and potentially producing additional bulletins, such as bespoke updates for cross-departmental project groups. As Jones at Lewis Silkin explains, this would be too time consuming to contemplate doing manually, but using Bulletin Pro, once the searches are set up, the process becomes fast and straightforward.

The ability to set and adjust topics for content collection, as well as formatting templates and setting publishing and distribution lists and schedules gives firms flexibility around assigning responsibility for producing particular updates while maintaining quality and consistency so that the look and feel of updates is the same across the firm, notwithstanding who is responsible for publishing them.
Standing out from the competition

The system is user friendly and the ‘topics’ are quick to set up. The straightforward editing capability enables lawyers and business support professionals to personalise each bulletin to its specific internal or external readership by promoting important pieces and adding guidance and insights so that the content is genuinely repurposed, not just repackaged. The user experience, from the reader’s perspective, reflects the same flexible approach, whereby subscribers can choose and adjust the number and frequency of the updates they receive and how they access the information. According to one major law firm, Bulletin Pro stands out from the competition because “it is clear, straightforward and simple to use – which is a weakness in some other systems.”

Bulletin Pro offers full integration with Thomson Reuters legal information resources including Westlaw UK, Lawtel alerts and Practical Law legal updates and can trawl specific alerts set up by individuals at the firm. However, the system is platform agnostic in terms of gathering content, including information, updates and alerts from other subscription services as well as publicly available news and information resources from websites – including law firm websites – RSS feeds, blogs and Twitter feeds, and foreign language content.

In addition to streamlining content collection, bulletin production and distribution, minimising repetitive, time-consuming work, and therefore reducing the cost of current awareness without compromising on content or production quality, Bulletin Pro includes features that take it beyond current awareness and help to boost competitive advantage for the firms and lawyers who use it.

If you would like more information or to arrange a demonstration of Bulletin Pro:

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