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Establishing rapport, 140 characters at a time

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The best corporate legal advice is often described as concise and understandable.

By that logic, would the best lawyers be the best tweeters?

W. Andrew Douglass hopes so. His nearly 750 Twitter followers, many of whom he says are in-house counsels, are tuned into tweets he calls "sound bites" about developments in the law around employee benefits compliance.

Also known as @theERISAguy, Douglass is a shareholder at Polsinelli P.C. who will take over as head of the firm's employee benefits and executive compensation practice on Nov. 1. He joined the firm from Seyfarth, Shaw LLP in April.

Douglass' ambitious plan to more than double the 12-lawyer employee benefits practice to 30-plus attorneys is in line with the overall firm, which has grown from roughly 300 lawyers in 2008 to more than 740 today.

As the firm has done with other practices during its heady growth years, Douglass hopes the employee benefits practice will become a "destination" that draws large, institutional clients to Polsinelli.

His tweets are something like a goodwill down payment that he

hopes will lure them.

In August, linking to a 15-page bankruptcy court decision, he tweeted: "Bankruptcy court allows 363 sale free and clear of multi-employer pension liability; good news for employers."

Like many Twitter newbies, his first foray on the social media site ended as soon as it began. His first account, rarely used, lies dormant.

But in April last year he decided to give it another shot with @theERISAguy, referring to the Employee Retirement Income Security Act.

His Twitter "model," as he describes it, is to provide brief summations of recent developments that will arm a client — either a human relations employee or in-house counsel — with "140 characters' worth of a sound bite" in a meeting.

"That's the perspective I take: Trying to distill something," Douglass said. "And I suppose that's really the magic to social media or using the sound bite approach. To really be able to distill the information in a way that obviously gets the message across — but also plants the seed in the mind of the client that you are the person who can help solve the problem."

Douglass, who had practiced at Seyfarth, Shaw for more than 10 years, said he brought with him a



W. Andrew Douglass

number of large clients that will receive other legal services from Polsinelli in addition to ERISA-based counseling.

He stressed the quality of the lawyers in his new group and also said potential clients would be attracted to the firm because of its billing rate structure.

In general, he said the firm's rates are "10 to 20 percent" lower than top Am Law firms. In addition, depending on an attorney's location, rates can vary within the firm by another 20 to 30 percent, he said.

A large portion of the firm's attorneys are based in Kansas City, Mo., and other locations including Dallas, Denver and St.

Louis, where market rates for lawyers are lower.

"We don't want to lead with our rates, but if you like our service level we think you're going to love our billing rates," he said.

Another example of the goodwill down payments Douglass believes will separate Polsinelli's practice from other law firms is a software program the firm is currently developing for a client.

The software serves as a repository for the client's benefit plan documents and helps them organize and manage those documents and the regulatory filings required for 401(k)s and other employee benefit programs.

"We're looking for, basically, a way to give their whole HR service team a way to have a stake in maintaining good compliance strategies," Douglass said. "We feel that obviously has very nice outcomes for the client, but also the advisers and service providers."

For Douglass, it's also an example, like his tweets, of providing a different kind of client service.

"We feel the more connections we have with clients," he said, "whether it's these products or actual legal work, it creates a stronger relationship."