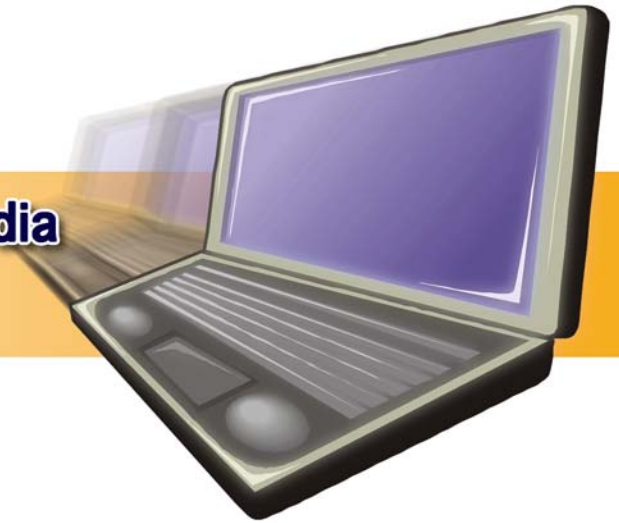


THE PROFESSIONAL SIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA:

Can Twitter, Facebook, and Wikipedia Help Build Your Business?



By Joanna Masterson

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Overwhelmed by all the buzz surrounding YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook? You are not alone.

Individuals and companies alike are contemplating the potential opportunities and drawbacks of joining the online social media blitz. Countless interactive platforms populate the Web 2.0 landscape, and each is accompanied by a brand new vocabulary—tweets, wikis, status updates, hashtags—that must be learned.

With so much changing so quickly, many businesses are left wondering if it's worth their time and energy to jump on the bandwagon—and if so, which one.

One important distinction to make is that “social” doesn't necessarily mean “unprofessional.” Rather, social media refers to anything that uses the Internet to facilitate conversations between people.

Three-quarters of Americans use social technology, and more than half of adults participate in a social network. Additionally, according to a 2008 study conducted by the Boston-based communications agency Cone:

- 93% of Americans believe a company should have a social media presence; and
- 56% of American consumers feel a stronger connection with—and better served by—companies with which they can interact online.

Social media promise to deliver an audience thirsty for information, foster company loyalty, elicit valuable feedback, and lead to

a competitive edge, but it also can be a giant time waster. So, what's a business to do?

Juan Bauza, vice president of Florida-based Cellucrete Corp., which is on LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, boils it down to this: “Social media is [sic] just another marketing tool. How you use it is totally up to you.”

EARLY ADOPTER EXPERIENCES

The pull of social media largely stems from the desire to connect with others—and not just friends and family. For consultants, potential audiences include employees, colleagues, building owners, suppliers, industry organizations and publications, architects, engineers, contractors, government offices, politicians, attorneys, and software developers.

“I'm amazed at who is on there,” says Heather Schlichting, corporate communications specialist for RSC Equipment Rental, Scottsdale, AZ, which has a presence on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. “I've seen some smaller general contractors expressing their views and sharing what's going on in the industry. They are serious, hard-core business people, not just teenagers talking about lunch. It's eye opening.”

Since getting involved in social media about nine months ago, RSC has accu-

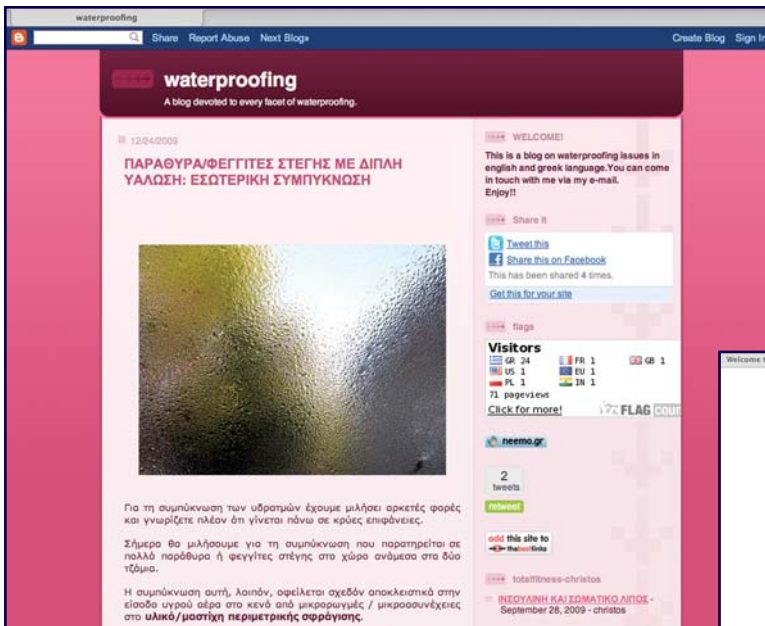
mulated 121 fans of its Facebook page and 848 followers on Twitter. (Translation: 121 Facebook users expressed interest in RSC by becoming a fan of its profile page featuring company background, news and photos; and 848 Twitter users track the information RSC posts.)

“The reason we got involved was for pure brand awareness—to test the waters, see what it was about and attract an audience,” Schlichting says. “It's another way we can communicate with customers and the public, and it's a good way to know what's going on out there. We're trying to create a community in which we share things with them and, in turn, they share things with us.”

Adds Dana Galvin, marketing manager for Barton Malow Company, Southfield, MI, “We've found Twitter to be a great PR tool

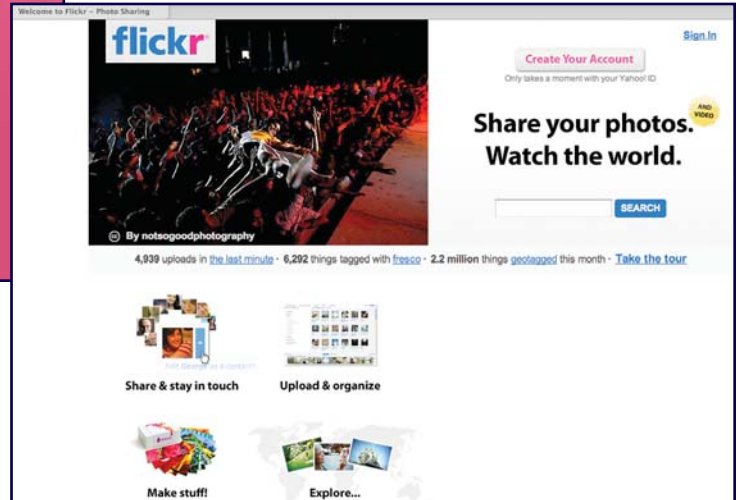


Roof consulting is still a wide-open topic in Twitterland. Note this tongue-in-cheek posting.



For those to whom waterproofing is Greek, this blog may be of some help.... A translation widget reveals the blogger is talking about condensation near windows and skylights.

Flickr is a photo management and sharing application now hosting more than 4 billion images.



and a great way to get top-of-mind recognition constantly. We have many construction publications following us, as well as peer professionals. It's a way to get information out much faster."

This interaction can bolster a firm's image during slow economic periods, with many experts asserting that companies can emerge from the downturn even stronger by maintaining contact with their audiences. In particular, social media can be effective for decentralized companies like RSC,

which has 463 locations across North America.

"People might not realize how big the company is. In a way that's good because we try to serve each community specially, but this gives us a broader presence. In this economy, people want to deal with a company that's solvent," Schlichting says.

From an internal perspective, contractors and consultants with offices in multiple locations can benefit from having a place to stay in touch online. Barton Malow's employees frequently travel among the

YOU MIGHT BE THINKING ...

This sounds complicated. "I like Twitter because it is so remarkably easy to use," says Brett McMahon, vice president of business development for Miller & Long, Bethesda, MD. "I am not the most tech-savvy. It took about 30 seconds to figure out." And figure it out he has. McMahon, who tweets from a personal account (not on behalf of Miller & Long), has more than 1,800 followers and primarily connects with people regarding political matters.

This sounds time-consuming. "I try to set aside time and go through things quickly," says Heather Schlichting of RSC Equipment Rental, who downloaded an application called TweetDeck to organize Twitter posts. "I can zip through them and see what I want to read about or retweet. I only pass on things that are valuable."

This sounds like something only large companies can do. "Social media [are] worthwhile for everyone," states Stephanie Brown of Constructive Communication, Inc. "Every single customer is communicating online. They will do a Google search before anything else, so it's important to appear in those search results." Creating a company Wikipedia article, commenting on blogs, or posting content to Flickr and YouTube are great ways to improve placement in search results. "If someone types in a search, who shows up – you or your competitor?" Brown asks of clients wary of social media. "Usually a light bulb goes on in their head when we look at competitors and show what they are doing."

This sounds like opening a can of worms. "People can get paralyzed by the fear of it," says Dana Galvin of Barton Malow Company, who reports some professional peers have been told, "You open yourself to a lot of negativity," as a reason not to explore social media. "My response is: They can say negative things about you whether you're on there or not. If you're on there, you can combat it and control the messaging."

firm's 13 U.S. offices, so last year it set up an invitation-only Facebook group to promote internal events and encourage employee collaboration and communication.

"Luckily, Barton Malow is progressive enough to realize social media is not going to go away," says Galvin, whose entire focus this year is advancing the company's Web presence. "Employees were already using it and promoting Barton Malow in a way, so we wanted to streamline the effort a little and take a 'one-company' approach."

Employees who have personal experience with social media often are responsible for spurring companies to give it a try. Kayla Kersey, administrative assistant at Albuquerque-based TLC Plumbing & Utility, suggested the company create a Facebook page about four months ago—figuring it could easily be removed if unsuccessful. To date, 47 people are fans of the page, about 85% of whom work at TLC.

"When I first put it up, employees were excited," Kersey says. "Most people who work here love their jobs and are passionate about what they do. For us to be involved in something that links to their family and personal life was positive."

Though Kersey currently updates the Facebook account only once a week, TLC hopes to connect more with customers and others in the New Mexico construction community in the future. In fact, the company is starting a new campaign—"We are TLC"—that seeks to add a personal touch to the residential service side of operations.

"Customers call and talk to us in the office, but the technicians are the ones who come into their homes. If we put pictures of technicians up on Facebook, then customers know what to expect," says Kersey, who also posts images from jobsites and industry and company events. "It's good for customers to know you treat employees well and that they enjoy where they work."

Portraying that image to the next generation of construction employees is equally important for an industry with such extreme workforce shortages. Social media have turned out to be a perfect fit for Barton Malow's 12-week paid internship program (LEAPS), which provides jobsite experience, training programs, and networking opportunities for 30 to 40 college students each summer.

At the urging of the human resources department, the company's corporate communications team built a Facebook fan page specifically for the LEAPS program so



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SOCIAL MEDIA CHEAT SHEET

Blog: A frequently updated, interactive Web site in which printed and graphic content—usually posted in reverse chronological order—can be commented on by readers.

- More than 60 million blogs exist, with 40,000 new blogs created every day.
- Technorati.com indexes hundreds of millions of global blog posts that users can search.

Delicious.com: A social bookmarking service that allows users to tag, save, manage, share, and search for Web pages.

- More than five million users and 150 million bookmarked URLs.

Digg.com: A centralized source of news, blogs, videos, and photos that people submit and rate; the more users “digg” something, the better placement it gets on the site.

Facebook.com: Communication platform in which users create an online profile and share updates, links, and photos with people they choose to connect with, called “friends.” Organizations can create groups and fan pages.

- More than 300 million active users worldwide and more than 45 million active groups.
- Site membership increased 85% in 2008, with the fastest growing demographic of users between the ages of 35 and 55.

Flickr.com: Photo management and sharing application with both free and premium memberships in which users can make content private or allow public content to be tagged, commented on, and reused.

- Hosts more than 4 billion images.

LinkedIn.com: A network in which business professionals can create a profile page, interact with other users via groups, and serve as experts in topical question-and-answer forums.

- 44 million members representing 170 industries.
- Average user is a 41-year-old male who makes \$100,000.

Twitter.com: Users create 140-character microblogs (called “tweets”) to share news and information—via text or links—with an audience of “followers,” as well as follow other users to gather news and information.

- 14 million accounts and 200,000 active users per week who tweet 3,000,000 times per day.
- Typical users are 45 to 54 years old and have a graduate degree.

Wikipedia.org: An open-ended encyclopedia written collaboratively by volunteer contributors from around the world; as such, information may not be 100% accurate.

- 65 million monthly visitors and more than 13 million articles.

Knol.google.com and **Squidoo.com** also invite users to share their knowledge on a range of topics.

YouTube.com: Destination for uploading, watching, and commenting on original videos; organizations can create their own YouTube channels.

- More than 142 million Americans watch an average of 80 videos per month, with 51% of all users visiting the site at least once a week.



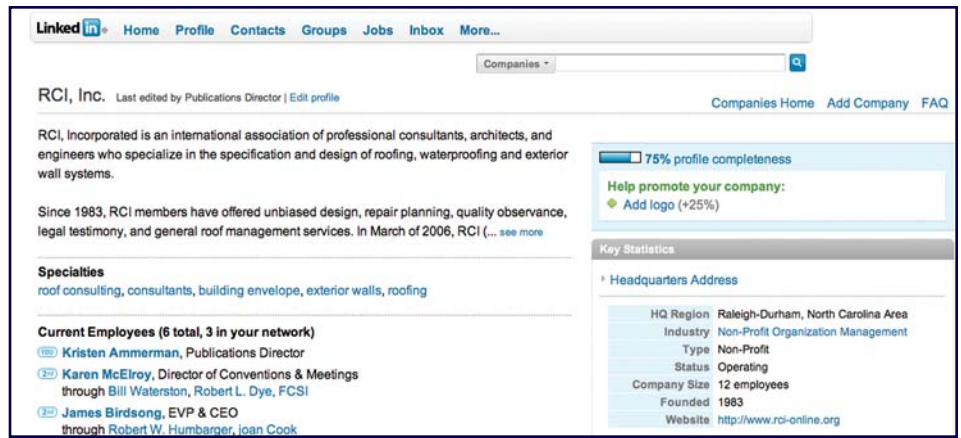
that future recruits could see photos and comments from current interns.

“This is our most progressive social media platform at this point,” Galvin says, and it’s largely driven by the fact that the company placed an ad on Facebook targeting students who would be graduating in the next two years with construction management, engineering, or related degrees. The ad doubled the number of fans, which now stands at 75 people. For Galvin, the page was a success as soon as one student said, “I’d like to get involved. How do I do that?”

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Knowing these benefits, the next step is figuring out how to establish a corporate presence on social sites. Stephanie Brown, interactive public relations specialist (a.k.a social media guru) with Constructive Communication, Inc., Dublin, OH, recommends performing an audit, similar to any other public relations, marketing, or sales initiative.

“Go online and listen to conversations and see where your target audience is,” she says, noting Google, search.twitter.com and Technorati.com are good places to start.



RCI, Inc. currently has a very basic presence on LinkedIn.com.

“Then come up with a strategy. Decide if Twitter or Facebook is where you’re supposed to be. Don’t just dive in and do everything you can. Have a goal and a plan.”

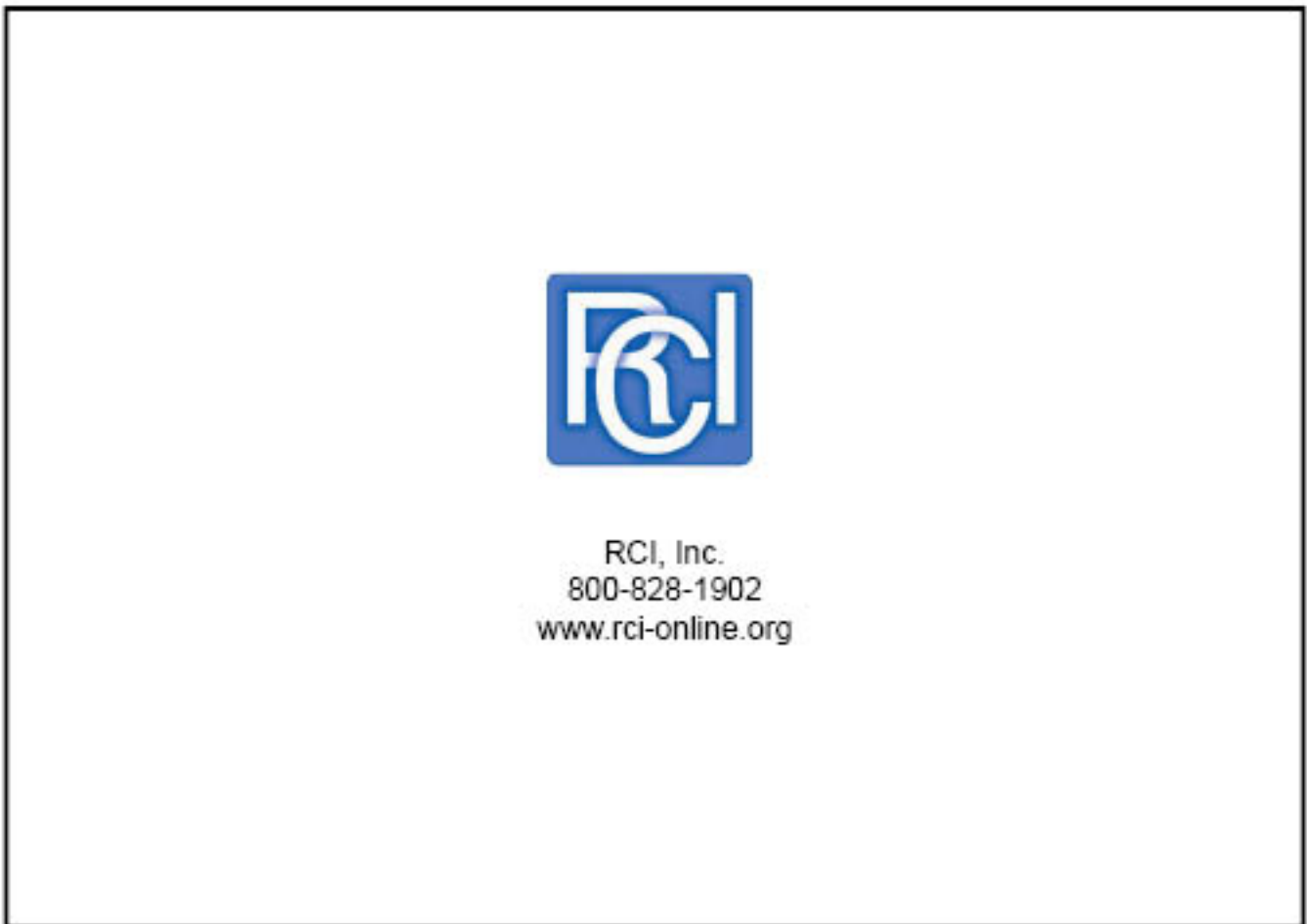
As users become more familiar with each platform, it’s crucial that they don’t neglect the accounts they set up. Maintaining a steady conversation is key to success.

If a company decides LinkedIn is the best fit, Brown suggests setting up a profile and searching for current employees and

other industry connections. Companies also should type key words into the “search group” tool to find groups to which they can contribute and position themselves as experts.

“With Twitter, search for competitors and look at their followers so you can start following some of the same. It will take a few months before you get a solid following, and even then you’re still not done,” Brown says.

Schlichting started out by performing



keyword searches for construction companies, industrial customers, and organizations involved in the sustainable movement. In turn, she hoped they would follow RSC.

“You start sending out messages and wonder, ‘Does anybody hear me?’” Schlichting recalls of her first foray on Twitter. “It doesn’t happen overnight. Just keep sending out messages every day. Find articles of interest to followers and be someone interested in people’s needs.”

According to Brown, other best practices include:

- Don’t pester people; think participation, not propaganda.
- Be authentic, personable, and transparent.
- Respond to all issues, questions, and complaints, and encourage feedback.
- Provide links to social media accounts on the company Web site and in e-mail signatures, newsletters, and advertisements.
- Consider posting pictures to Flickr that journalists can download and use for free.
- When blogging, use key words wisely to improve search results and include a variety of short and long posts, as well as photos and videos.


- On Twitter, add a bio, photo/logo, and URL to the profile section, and spend just as much time seeking information as tweeting.
- Make sure Wikipedia articles are neutral and fact-based, not opinionated sales pitches.

Another tip is to allow a variety of employees to help manage corporate social media accounts—both to infuse personality and credibility into company communications and to alleviate some of the time burden.

“You need to have rules so employees know the expectations for how long they can spend online so they don’t feel like they’re crossing the line,” Brown says.

In short, a corporate social media policy

is a must—complete with guidelines on how employees should represent themselves online and handle negative or inappropriate feedback about the company. Also touch on the importance of respecting confidentiality and proprietary information and complying with copyright and financial disclosure laws. And don’t forget the golden rule: Think before posting.

“Online social media [are] not going away,” Brown concludes. “Even if [they are] something you choose not to allow employees to participate in, it is crucial that you educate yourself and your leadership team in order to gain optimal positive exposure for your company, as well as alleviate any threats.” 

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