

 The Lodi Enterprise

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## Reaching out in the electronic age

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Reporter

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Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, the list goes on and continues to grow in what seems like an endless expansion of the world of social media. Many of these popular sites started out as a way for the digital generations to connect with old friends and meet new ones.

In a few short years this has changed and now music artists, businesses and even politicians are realizing how useful social media can be for getting information out to the world.

According to statistics on Facebook.com, more than 700,000 local businesses now have active pages on Facebook. And Lodi businesses aren't missing out on getting their share of the 350 million users on the social site.

Already over a dozen Lodi based businesses and organizations ranging from Weber's Bakery to the Lodi Enterprise to the Lodi High School soccer team has a page with fans reaching into the hundreds.

Wendy Soucie, of Wendy Soucie Consulting, specializes in offering business development, strategy and social media advice to her clients.

She said the whole process which consumers gather information about products and services has changed with the Internet and it's important for businesses to grow along with it.

"People used to have to talk to sales people to learn what they needed to know but now Google becomes the homepage for anything they are looking for," Soucie said. "If businesses want to succeed they need to be on the Internet."

Soucie said using social media is just another piece of the Internet puzzle to get information about your business out to as many consumers as possible.

"Besides having a Web site or being found in one of the directories (online or the phonebook), social networking is one other place where you can engage and meet other people," Soucie said. "Before they become your clients they want to see what you have to offer and get to know you first."

Soucie believes that social media sites such as Facebook can be useful for any kind of business, however she advises business owners do research to find out which site would work best for your business, setting a practical goal for what you want to accomplish and then evaluating the site to see if the goal is being reached.

"A site like Twitter.com is like a cocktail party. A lot of short, brief bits of information people are there briefly, some spend a couple hours some spend five minutes, but the conversation is short and sweet," Soucie said. "Facebook is more like your backyard garden party. People stay a little longer if the weather's nice. They talk a little about business, they talk a little about their kids and family. There's more conversation, more sharing."



Lodi Public Library assistant Laurie Gwynne updates the library's Facebook page.

Photo Rachelle Blair

To friend or not to friend However, when it comes to businesses jumping into the world of social media, Soucie suggests setting up guidelines for how the sites will be used. An example would be should a business owner "friend" clients on their personal profile or maintain a strictly business relationship?

Soucie said that is a conundrum that many of her clients face. She personally uses her Facebook profile for both business and friend relationships.

"I have friends and business contacts connected to me in all the places I am online," Soucie said. "That helps me be very focused on the kind of things that I say. I never know where that information is going so I am always conscience to not say things that would irritate my mother, my father, my sisters, my spouse, my employer, or my customers."

Local business owner Deb Fallon, of Sunfall on Main, agrees that the fine line of separation between customer and friend is hard to see.

"Obviously doing business in a small town and a small shop some customers are also friends," Fallon said. "When it comes to Facebook the dilemma is do I 'friend' them or 'fan' them or both?"

Fallon hopes using social media will help promote both her business and the city of Lodi.

"If someone sees my posting not only does it invite them to visit my shop, but it may remind them they also had other things they intended to do in Lodi," Fallon said.

Local non-profits are also getting into the social media mix. Lodi Woman's Club Public Library has been on Facebook since Sept. 2009. Co-director Kristine Millard said a big reason the library jumped on the social media bandwagon was to better inform customers about events and remind them that the library is always there.

"What's nice is now we can notify people about events at the library who might not have seen it posted elsewhere," Millard said.

How often to update?

Soucie said a concern many of her clients have is how often to post updates to the various social media sites. She said one update a day on Facebook is usually sufficient. Too many posts in one day and Soucie said readers might just glance over the information. Millard is a big advocate for keeping the library's Facebook page updated. She said even if there are no special events happening she will at least post a library related quote just to stay in fans' newsfeeds.

Another reason Millard said the library joined Facebook was so the staff could stay on top of the ever-changing technology to field any questions their clients might have.

However, no matter how often businesses update to the sites, why they joined or what information they publish, Soucie said the most important thing is that they make social networking work for them.

"Don't jump on any social media site just because someone tells you to be on Facebook," Soucie said. "Do your own research, talk to your customers to see if they are on there, create a business goal and do some measurement and tracking to make sure you're moving towards that goal."

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