



PIECING TOGETHER THE SOCIAL MEDIA PUZZLE

By: Dan Namovitch

notion that social media sites are used exclusively to catch-up with old friends and post funny videos. What many aren't aware of is that this same technology has been adapted by businesses to create powerful marketing and recruiting channels. LinkedIn was created specifically to serve the needs of professionals, but even Facebook and Twitter have been adopted by those in service industries to get their message in front of their target audience.

Soucie doesn't agree that maintaining a presence on sites where millions of people visit is a waste of time. She does, however, understand the concerns of management and suggests that people start thinking of these new tools similarly to how they employ more traditional methods for marketing and recruiting.

"The trouble with that thinking is that they're not looking at engagement in social media like they would other things. They think

you have to just jump in. They're not thinking strategies. They're not thinking business goals," she said.

Before engaging in a coordinated campaign, Soucie strongly recommends that a social media policy be implemented. Among other things, this policy would set forth which employees should be involved, what they are allowed to say or do, who they can engage with and how much time they're allowed to spend on a daily or weekly basis.

It's also important to create a consistent brand. When individuals sign-on to LinkedIn they're asked to create an extended profile. Soucie encourages her clients to see that all of their employees are describing the firm in a consistent manner, right down to using carefully selected keywords associated with their services and philosophies.

While younger employees might be the most comfortable and inclined to engage in social media, Soucie believes that the biggest marketing benefits can be had when

the principals of the firm jump on board.

"When people look at a professional service firm, their impression is clearly defined by the principals. And therefore their profiles on a social site should be top-notch," she said.

There's no shortage of P.E.s networking on social media sites. At this time, however, the public-sector professionals often involved with selecting consultants don't appear to be flocking there in great numbers.

"I don't know yet if customers





we work with are going out to LinkedIn to find out who's the expert in wastewater treatment. As it currently is, I don't think it's a business development tool. It's a recruiting tool," said Jon Howaniec, director of human resources for Clark Dietz, Inc.

He decided to check out LinkedIn after hearing a presentation on social media at a conference. Clark Dietz doesn't have a social media policy, although around 50 of its employees have profiles on LinkedIn.

Howaniec is starting to use LinkedIn in his recruiting efforts, but hasn't yet used it to post a job listing. LinkedIn also offers a premium service that allows users to send a message to any of the 26 million people who are registered on the site. That's a powerful tool when searching for talent to fill a vacancy. It's also another area of concern with social media

Users of LinkedIn create a profile which basically reads as a resume. They can share their expertise in electronic forums or post links to white papers they've written. All of this can make a person look very attractive as a potential hire, which could make their present employer a bit nervous.

Howaniec acknowledged that poaching is a possibility, although he doesn't believe that should discourage employers from allowing their staff to network online.

"It's up to the firm to make sure that we provide a compelling place to work and good benefits and a fair compensation and challenging projects so that people want to stay.

Because ultimately, if it's LinkedIn or the next thing, the barriers have long been eroded as to trying to insulate your staff from talking to recruiters or entertaining other offers," he said.

Marc Mitalski, P.E., S.E., is a business owner who has fully embraced social media.

He's in a unique position because in addition to consulting services, his firm, PREPA.R.E., Inc., offers online review courses for Architect Registration Exam (ARE) candidates preparing for the structural systems exam. Mitalski is



also a visiting assistant professor at the University of Illinois, a position that puts him into direct contact with the "connected generation."

Since registering with LinkedIn less than a year ago, Mitalski has made 800 connections with former and current students, colleagues and clients from around the country and the world. He understands what a valuable resource he has accumulated, as long as he takes advantage of it.

"I think you need to have a plan of how you're going to use these connections. You can't just let them sit there like baseball cards that you

just look at occasionally," he said.

Mitalski, who estimates that he spends about 15 minutes per day with social media, communicates with his network by promoting PREPA.R.E.'s courses. His efforts have resulted in business for the firm's consulting services, as well.

"I've had people who've taken our courses come back and say, 'Now I'm a licensed architect, can we hire you as an engineer,'" he said.

At the present time, Mitalski is the exception rather than the rule when it comes to embracing social media in the A/E industry. One thing that both adherents and detractors seem to agree on is that social media, while growing rapidly, won't surpass more traditional forms of networking any time soon.

Marc Rogers is a classmate of Ryland's at the U. of I. and also a member of the "connected generation." While he admitted that a site such as LinkedIn could prove valuable in future job searches, in his experience networking still requires a personal touch

"I still believe in an old-fashioned phone call. If a contact is important enough to be helping me land a job, I should have the decency to call them," he said.

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It's no surprise that Starbucks was rated the number one worldwide brand in terms of engagement with social media. With its relatively young and tech-savvy clientele, it makes sense that the coffee purveyor would be taking to Twitter and Facebook. That's where their customers are.

Civil engineers don't have a whole lot in common with baristas, but they might be surprised to find that their clients and colleagues are also using social media to meet people and talk shop. The big three sites in social networking - Facebook (400 million users), LinkedIn (65 million users) and Twitter (26 million users) - are being adopted in big numbers by professionals.

For young or aspiring engineers, using social media to network is as natural as mingling at a conference is to their more experienced colleagues.

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media sites. My generation knows nothing other than these sites," said Michelle Ryland, a graduate student focusing on structural engineering at the University of Illinois School of Architecture.

For those who didn't grow up online - including the owners and principals at many of the consulting firms throughout the state - the concept of social media can be a bit foreign. And what they do know about Facebook and similar sites doesn't make them seem conducive to doing business.

"The reaction I get when I talk to professional service firms in general is that they're scared that their staff will waste time, that the billable time will get eaten up. I've talked to some quite large engineering firms and accounting firms and to a one, that's what they're worried about," said Wendy Soucie, a social media consultant (www.wendysoucie.com)

This impression is based on the