

FINANCE AND COMMERCE

Construction

February 3, 2010

Association update: How to unify engineering firms' use of social networking

by Ingenuity Marketing Group, American Council of Engineering Companies of Minnesota, Guest Commentary

Engineers are both the first to adopt, and also the longest hold-outs on, new social networking technologies. This can create internal rifts in firms. In this article we'll look at the ways engineering firms are using social networking and how firms can bridge the divide between early adopters and nay-sayers.

Firms are using the new tools in three main ways:

Professional networking

Engineering firms use LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook to make connections and bring in business. The first two tools are used most commonly to stay in front of clients and attract prospects, while Facebook is often used as a recruiting tool.

Zac Essig, a planning and design engineer with a metro-area firm, McCombs Frank Roos Associates Inc., and an active member of ACEC/MN, explains how his firm uses Twitter: "Twitter has proven results with promoting our successes and our client's successes. This month we tweeted a day-to-day countdown to the grand opening of the Minnetonka BMW dealership. Our client, BMW, saw this and direct messaged us about their shared excitement and thanked us for the mentions."

Knowledge sharing

Firms can use blogs, Twitter and other sites that have forums or comments to demonstrate their expertise and draw from others, in addition to staying up on the latest developments in their fields. For firm members who are just beginning to use social networking, reading online articles and discussions can be a great way to start. For the expert user, there are now thousands of opportunities to post expert knowledge.

"All companies need to know their clients' interests, desires and needs," Essig said. "Using social networking allows us to add an angle to the ways we accomplish that understanding and the way in which we lead our industry. With tweeting about up-to-date articles that highlight important events and opinions, we are showing that we are remaining on the forefront and are qualified and prepared to engage with all aspects of our industry."

Project collaboration

This new field of real-time, conversational technology means that firms have many more ways to collaborate with clients and partner firms. Some firms are also using technology like wikis and blogs to foster communication internally.

ACEC/MN member Fred King of Inspec explained, "As a past board member for the Minnesota Educational Facility Management Professionals (formerly Minnesota Association of School Maintenance Supervisors), we've found that sharing of information from district to district makes everyone more efficient. We started a blog site for the regular/non-vendor members to exchange information. The schools use this tool to help solve problems and answer questions."

Trying to implement all the social networking technologies at once can be daunting, especially when you have different levels of usage in your firm. Below are a few steps to help unify corporate social networking.

1. Create a social media policy.
2. Set up a firm page on LinkedIn and Facebook and reserve your name on Twitter.
3. Create clear social media objectives and a strategy to achieve them. (This will help you determine which sites to focus on.)
4. Find out who in your firm is already using these tools and align them with your strategy.
5. Find out who is not using the tools at all and help them set up a LinkedIn profile. Let them start slowly.
6. Pair up a "resister" with a firm member in their area who is adept at using social networking in a mini-mentoring program.
7. Train your social networking users to share results with your marketing department so you can track what's working best for your firm.

As Minnesota's voice for the engineering community, the American Council of Engineering Companies of Minnesota (ACEC/MN) is available to answer questions and provide guidance to firms seeking to improve their use of social networking. ACEC/MN encourages engineering excellence and furthering the advancement of the engineering profession.