

SOCIAL MEDIA AVENUES EXPAND NETWORKING, VISIBILITY

by Katie Kalkman and Christine Hierlmaier Nelson



Just when you thought it was indispensable, the days of e-mail are numbered.

A new generation of communication and networking tools is gaining momentum and offering more interactivity, reaching more people faster than you can hit *send*.

By now you've probably heard of blogs, podcasts and social networking sites like LinkedIn and Facebook. You may have seen some funny and educational vidclips on YouTube. You probably *Google*, but do you *Twitter*?

Whether your company is typically an early adopter or a wait-and-see onlooker, these social media tools are attracting more users with their ease and cost

share a video diary online, which could document an apprenticeship program, a corporate expansion or other significant company event.

Posting questions on industry blogs read by your colleagues can lead you to quick answers from other industry leaders. To find a list of relevant industry or regulatory blogs, use a blog search engine such as Google Blog Search, Technorati.com or Blog Search Engine. Subscribe to three or four to start and read them once a week. Once you have a feel for the industry buzz, you can decide if creating your own corporate blog might be useful to tie into the blog network.



leadership. Quarterly podcast interviews with your CEO could be used internally to report on the status of the company or industry. A podcast could highlight company differentiators or alert customers to industry trends.

To create a podcast, investigate MP3 recording software. Choose someone with a great radio voice and practice before you record. Your script should have shorter sentences and appropriate pauses so

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effectiveness for networking, marketing and information gathering. Like any technology, however, it pays to shop around and consider your audience, time commitment, resources and value for your investment.

Bloggers and Vloggers

A Web log, or blog, is like a mini Web site that is usually maintained by an individual or company with regular entries of commentary. You are a blogger if you write for one, comment on or ask questions about the content of blogs. Blogs are gaining credibility in industries that are highly technical and specific, because you can share information faster than through a newspaper or magazine, network with other industry experts and build visibility as an expert. They are also being used as recruitment tools to share the culture of the company. As a blogger, you write. As a vlogger, you

Keep in mind that the most effective blogs have a new post at least once a week, so you will need to designate people in your company who will write for it much like a corporate newsletter. In fact, companies are transitioning their newsletters to blogs so that readers can view them at their convenience and also post comments or questions—increasing customer intimacy.

Invasion of the Podcasts

With the advent of MP3 files and portable media players, any type of marketing or training print materials can be converted to an audio presentation. Podcasts are simply audio files you can download from the Internet. Play them on your personal computer or iPod or hybrid cell phone. Listen to them while driving, working on the yard or multitasking at work.

Companies are creating podcasts to share knowledge of their industry or products, rather than in a catalog or employee manual. Podcasts save on print costs and paper. They are portable and can demonstrate the “personality” of your

that listeners can digest the information. Consider hiring a writer to create the scripts or to edit an interview.

Virtual Networking

Remember that crazy prediction that e-mail is on its way out? The reason may be social networking. Online “communities” are allowing people to catch up with friends, network and share information without e-mail because each community has its own communication tools. The sites also alert you if someone has left you a message, joined the community or asked to be added to your network.

Joining an online social network is not much different from joining professional associations such as the Minnesota Precision Manufacturing Association (MPMA), except that you meet with people online instead of in person. This is incredibly beneficial if your company is looking for strategic partnerships in other countries or even across the country. While there are hundreds of social networking sites available, Facebook and MySpace are still among the most popular. Strictly business? Check out LinkedIn.com.



The sites are free to join. They walk you through a tutorial to create a secure personal profile. You can then invite people to join your network, share professional information and the firm's mission, link your profile to the company Web site (which directs more people to your Web site), ask for testimonials from colleagues and customers and request information from other members.

Keep in mind that in social networking you may be "discovered" by former classmates, colleagues or others from your past. Add only those people who you would typically add to a Rolodex for business development or services. In order to maintain a professional image, be careful of the type of information or photos you include in your profile. Prospects, customers and candidates are on these sites, too.

Twitter is another free version of social networking that allows users to send posts about what they are doing in short 140-character messages to the Twitter home pages of their friends and colleagues or to cell phones. Twitter could be a replacement for e-mail if you have salespeople who travel frequently and want to send quick updates on the results of a sales call or business trip. You can also Twitter blog posts to expand the reach of your blog.

Video Nation

Speaking of expanding views, YouTube has been discovered by companies as a new way to recruit talent, promote products and increase visibility on an international scale.

This popular and free video-sharing site is a matrix of educational and entertaining videos that range from business, to politics to music and pop culture. It gives new meaning to the idea of instant fame because a posted video can "go viral" or gain international notoriety within hours.

YouTube videos are typically short, often entertaining or humorous and have a message or theme. They can add visual pop to a contest or marketing campaign, create buzz around an upcoming event or give young talent another way of learning about your company.

While some company owners have noted concern about sharing too much information about themselves with competitors through their Web sites, let alone these new online tools, there is little cause for concern given the scope and direction of online communication. Your Web site is now like a drop in the ocean. Online tools simply point more fingers to your company like signposts on a highway. Without these signposts, you and your

competitors will miss some strategic opportunities to connect to an increasingly technology savvy audience.

Begin by exploring one of these tools. Determine expectations and potential pros and cons. Monitor and measure results as you would any marketing or business development initiative.

One more tip: social media is designed for you to connect with people in new ways. Adopt it to enhance rather than detract from the in-person networking you currently do. That way, if e-mail or any other tool disappears, your relationships won't. **PM**

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