

Demystifying Social Media, Part Two

The plan is simple: Give value, get visibility.



BY ANNE SCARLETT

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PART ONE OF THIS ARTICLE (see September 2009 *MSC*) addressed the question of what social media is, and what makes sense for the AEC professional. Part two covers making wise decisions on how and where to become active within the social media community.

Because you are an AEC technical professional, social media is clearly not your full-time focus. It would be easy to become overwhelmed, resentful, and stubborn about the whole thing. No doubt you are skeptical about its value. Take time to review the numbers. Articles run rampant across the Internet regarding how businesses can use social media to their advantage. It's not just in business-to-consumer scenarios, but also for business-to-business (B2B) relationships—which is what the AEC industry is typically all about. Every day more opportunities emerge in social media for B2B relationships that yield real value. If you have not already done so, it's time to open your mind to the possibilities.

Establishing your social media program requires patience, focus, and organization. Start by dedicating an entire day—preferably an entire weekend—to focus on the set up. Do not do this in dribs and drabs; you will only lose your place and become frustrated. Setup involves registering on multiple accounts, making sure you “claim” your own name wherever possible on the Internet. The initial “getting started” steps were explained in September in part one. *In addition* to those basic steps, here's a list of *musts* if you want to take this seriously.

First, attend to the three tools that some people refer to as the trifecta of social media.

- **LinkedIn:** Complete your profile. Give valuable details on your education and career path. Take time to write an eloquent, easy-to-understand narrative description. Add a personal interest or two. Let the application go through your email address books, but then hand-select individuals with whom you want to link. Join relevant groups in your industry and in your clients' fields. Finally,

make sure to add your picture, and include a status update (which you should keep updating, because your “connections” will receive weekly LinkedIn reports that will include your new status).

- **Twitter:** Start by signing up, completing your description/profile, customizing your background, and uploading your picture. Then, hook into people you already know, and look for people you admire and want to follow. You may not have much to say at first. In that case, watch carefully to see how the system works. *Selling* is not well-received in this medium. Twitter is about providing valuable data; helping others; collaborating; offering kudos. Intertwined within, you are occasionally welcome to toot your horn or link to content about you/your firm—an article, blog entry, upcoming speaking engagement, new service offering. You also should set up your profile on Twellow (twellow.com), which bills itself as “The Twitter Yellow Pages.” Make sure to place yourself/your firm in all appropriate search categories. And familiarize yourself with Twitter-related tools that will make it easier for you to manage. One example: socialoomph.com (formerly tweetlater.com), where you can schedule future tweets of quality content that you'd like to share.
- **Facebook:** Create a fan page for your company. Make sure that someone is monitoring the content of that page. Re-purpose content from your firm's blogs and articles. Further, use RSS feeds (mentioned in part one) as a means for collecting great data that can also be shared on your firm's Facebook page. If you use Facebook for your personal life as well, then be cautious about your privacy settings. Business and personal lines can get dangerously blurred unless you are smart about it. Also, try to reserve your own name (if still available) as your Facebook direct link.

Next, realize that variety is an important social media strategy. Consider adding:

- **YouTube:** Many marketers recommend video as an essential part of a savvy firm's marketing program. Videos are informative, endearing, and can most certainly create a connection that starts to feel more real, and more human.
- **PRWeb (or similar):** Press releases are designed and optimized, by you, in a step-by-step process. As long as you have quality content and keywords, this program will help ensure that your firm shows up in the Readers (i.e. Google; Yahoo) reviewed by editors, bloggers, and prospects alike. In the past, your press releases would only be received and read by editors. Each editor would either opt to use your content and quotes or not. Now, with today's various key word alert functions, your releases will reach a much wider audience, even if the editor chooses not to publish your material.
- **Google Voice:** Google Voice gives you a single phone number that rings all your phones, saves your voicemail online, and transcribes your voicemail to text.
- **Steeltools.org:** For structural engineers specifically, become active on steeltools.org, your industry-specific Facebook-esque application that serves as a forum to discuss steel activities and products. And don't forget the opportunities for file sharing among your peers. I'm guessing this model soon will be mimicked by other disciplines within the AEC industry.

How deep should I/we go?

I read an exceptional article entitled "*SWOT Analysis for Social Media*" by Pete Hollier, a consultant to SEO Wizardry. Conducting this analysis is a perfect way to determine the depth to which your firm, or you as an individual, should get involved in social media as a means for new business and higher visibility. For example, your current target client audience may not yet be highly involved (the public sector would be a good example of people that are not truly engaged in this medium as of yet) but believe me, someday they will be. You and your firm might as well get ahead in the game, masterfully dancing through the system so that by the time your clients really are "listening," you're already a true social media and Web 2.0 player. Voila! Instant credibility.

What return will I/we get?

Data is constantly coming in now regarding the actual returns on investments that people are receiving from their active involvement in social media and Web 2.0. The biggest plus seems to be the access to people and the true relationship building and rapport that can occur between people who otherwise would not naturally cross paths. This is always taken into the real world at some point, where you meet these people in person, yet feel like you already know them quite well. Other returns: referral sources; increasing your firm's visibility; respect for your brand; leads and business opportunities.

Sharing and Monitoring

By reading and researching, you can find many tips regarding getting involved as a newbie in social media—from proper online etiquette (yes, this is taken seriously) to ways to grow your followers on sites such as Twitter. One thing is certain: gone are the days of "black box" and "proprietary" information. You must be willing to share good, valuable, worthwhile content. You must have something to say that others want to read. You cannot be concerned about whether or not your competitor learns something about the way you handled a particular design challenge. Keep in mind, you can also keep tabs on what they are saying. The best way, in my opinion, to keep your eye on your clients, competitors, and what people are saying about your own firm is to set up a reader (I prefer Google reader for its simplicity and organizational functions) where you can get *alerts* and *RSS feeds* from blogs. Once you've set this up, it becomes your perfect one-stop shop to ensure that all things relating to your hottest topics are constantly fed into one place (and yet, it won't clutter your inbox).

Continuing Education

The resources for self-education on Web 2.0 (which includes social media) are abundant. I do suggest two "musts" to help you self-train and stay informed: **Mashable** (follow on Twitter, and sign up for the RSS feed), and the dozens of "**Plain English**" videos on social media topics, produced by Commoncraft.

Social media really is like anything else; what you put into it is what you'll get out of it. That said, you must stay in control—put your time toward the content and relationship building, rather than worrying about mastering every detail or new gadget. Commit to a small selection of organizational tools (several were mentioned in this article) from the beginning. Strategize with your firm about messages and content. And remember, because so many AEC firms are not yet deeply engaged, you and/or your firm will still be considered on the forefront if you elevate your online presence, *right now*.

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