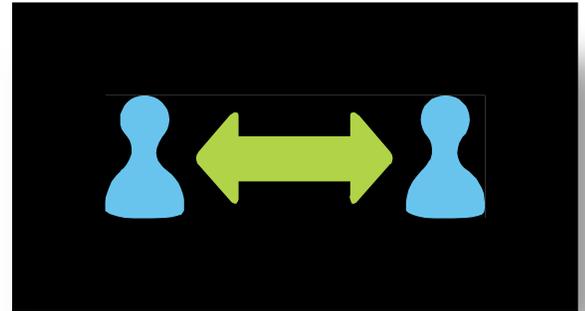


Social Media 101

Facebook. Linked In. YouTube. Twitter. Digg. Blog. Micro-blog. Bulletin Boards. Forums. All of these are examples of social media. As a private practitioner, you should be using social media as part of the services you provide and as a way to market your services. Here's a basic introduction to social media and how to use it.

Social media differs from traditional media in an important way: it invites other people to be part of the conversation. Traditional media, such as television, radio, newspapers and magazines, are one-way conversations. Social media allows the audience to participate, engage in a dialogue and create online content. It's a natural for the planning profession—we're always looking for ways to increase public participation and reach out to the community at large.



Whether or not you use social media, it impacts you, simply by its enormous presence. It's that proverbial elephant in the living room. Consider these statistics:

- Facebook has 355,000,000 users worldwide. The average user has 130 friends. There are more than 3.5 billion pieces of content shared every month on facebook.
- The first place people look for information is the internet. Google is used for 200,000,000 searches every day. YouTube is the second most used search engine.
- LinkedIn is used by 50,000,000 people. Interest groups are formed daily. The American Planning Association Group alone has 4,300 members.
- Twitter has over 50 million users. That's a lot of tweets!
- Social networking consumes 10% of all time spent on the internet and its usage is growing exponentially.

By using social media in your practice, your projects will be accessible to those who can't or don't want to attend public meetings. Here are some easy ways to incorporate social media using three common outlets, facebook, twitter and blogs.

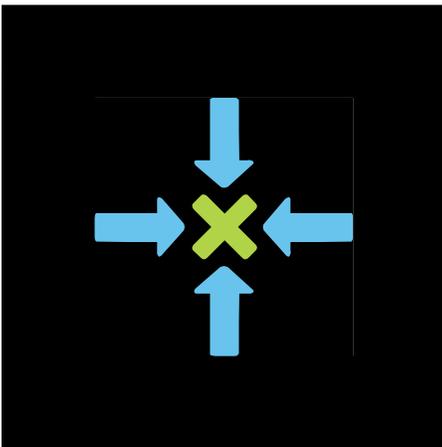
Facebook is a great and free place to create a page for your public projects. On the project page, you can post basic project information, photos, meeting notices, links to newspaper articles and video clips and meeting minutes. The public can and will comment on project information. For an example of a lively project page, go to facebook and look at the MBTA-Green-Line-Extension page.

Twitter is useful for sending out short, information rich bursts. You're limited to 140 characters--including spaces, symbols and punctuation—so make each one count. Send out meetings notices, deadline reminders for comment and links to project pages.

Blogs are a terrific opportunity to engage the public and can be accessed by links to facebook and twitter. Use blogs to post comment generating questions. As an example, post the same questions you ask to generate discussion at public meetings.

In your practice, social media can be a valuable addition to your marketing plan, for several reasons.

- Your competition is out there—or will be soon.
- Your clients are out there. If your clients are local governments, many of them link their website to facebook and use twitter to announce events. If your clients are homebuilders, they are apt to have a facebook presence as well.
- The first place people look for information is the internet. Google is used for 200,000,000 searches every day. YouTube is the second most used search engine. When you have a presence on social networks, you can manage your brand.
- You can establish new relationships and build your reputation. Because social media is two way communication, you can receive feedback and learn directly from your customers or potential customers.



There are four keys to successful social media marketing. First, start with a base of interested people, which will then build on itself. Begin with that contact list you maintain and use those folks as your initial contacts.

Second, deliver content that people perceive as valuable. Make sure that what you post is of high quality and gives people sound information. Third, capture their email address. Give them a reason to want to read more of what you post. Finally, stay in touch. Communicate on a regular basis. Keep those relationships going.

Are you ready to use social media? Here are some first steps you can take. Join LinkedIn and start establishing your network by entering connections. Join groups that relate to your practice and join in the conversation. Start a group or a conversation. LinkedIn will send you weekly updates about your connections' activities.

Build a page on facebook for your business. Post photos of your firm's activities, project graphics, links to interesting articles and announce new ventures. Facebook sends you weekly feedback about who visits your page.

Go to WordPress.com and sign up for a free blog. You can become your own reporter, editor and publisher all in one. Blogging done correctly will generate discussion and build new relationships.

People are using the internet to look up the services you offer. People are asking questions on their networks about the services you offer. Get established on social media and channel the huge potential that is out there for your business.

*Mary Kay Peck, FAICP, is principal of MKPeck Associates. She has a facebook page, is connected on LinkedIn and has her own blog. Soon she will be tweeting. **Reprinted with permission of Private Practice Division, American Planning Association.***