



SOCIAL MEDIA @ WORK

Companies are learning how to integrate this “new wave of marketing” into their businesses. But is there a downside?

BY ART SWIFT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID KIDD

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—Donita Prakash
Acumen Solutions

Donita Prakash said she was skeptical about Facebook, until she realized a pleasant by-product of the wildly popular social media network.

“I had the opinion that it was a fad,” Prakash said. “People ‘poke’ each other, ‘throw sheep,’—but I’ve reconnected with people from 20 years ago. Even though it’s a more personal slant. I think it’s here to stay.”

Prakash is the Chief Marketing Officer for Acumen Solutions in Vienna. Her company is a business and technology consulting firm which nowadays is immersed in helping clients set up and maintain social media platforms as part of their marketing efforts.

“For business to business work we use Facebook and LinkedIn,” Prakash said. “The most basic way to use this is as a networking tool. As a marketer, I keep in touch with people who used to work here. It’s good for referrals to hire people. We can share leads and those are very valuable.”

Prakash detailed how companies are scrambling to become a part of Facebook especially. No longer just a way for post-college grads to keep in touch with their friends, businesses are seizing on its potential, although many still aren’t sure how to use it or whether they should join the site.

SOCIAL MEDIA TERMS YOU SHOULD KNOW

The technological world is abuzz with “social media” yet there are still many business-people in Northern Virginia who don’t know what it comprises. New terms seem to emerge every few months, as new web platforms spring to life, so if you want to understand this rapidly expanding vernacular, read on.

Some of the terms and phrases in this story may be obvious to you and others may not be. Let’s see how many you do know.

What is a blog?

This is an easy one (hopefully). A contraction of the term “web log,” a blog is a Web site that is updated frequently with new content by its owner. Blogs started out as a sort of Internet diary, rarely read by anyone but the owner or a few select friends. The practice has evolved, though, and some blogs are read by millions of people a day. Most blogs also allow readers to post comments on blog entries and on others’ comments, leading to engaged discussions.

A Vlog

Not a Scandinavian term, but the relatively new idea of “video logging,” or a video blog. In the era of YouTube this has become much more popular. Don’t want to actually type out your personal diary entries? Just set up a webcam and record your thoughts, then post them to the web. The problem with vlogs is that they are difficult to find in a search engine since there are no words to search.

Microblogging

Just what you’re guessing it would be: short blog posts, typically under 140 characters, and it’s what the social media site Twitter is marketing. (The 140 character limit is what many cellular phones allow for text messages.) Blogs were meant to be short when they were created, so that you didn’t have to waste the time receiving information from something old-fashioned like a newspaper. In this current quicker-than-quick era, Twitter is even faster.

Twitter and Tweets

Speaking of Twitter, what is it? You may or may not have heard the name yet, but its presence has been growing rapidly in 2008. Twitter is a microblogging tool which allows you to give quick updates of what you or your company is doing and link to interesting stories. These updates or posts are called “tweets” and you can sign up to receive them via text messaging, RSS feeds, or through their own application called Twitterrific. (Cool name, right?) Twitterrific is a Mac OS X, iPhone and iPod Touch client for Twitter, and through Twitterrific you can view your Tweets and anyone else’s Tweets.

Facebook

You can also view Tweets through Facebook, but that’s only a smidgen of the things you can do on the world’s number-one social networking site — Facebook ascended to that title just this year, according to comScore. Facebook is a Web site that is membership-based; you can invite people to become members of your page and vice versa. You have to have a Facebook account and be accepted by another Facebook member to see his or her page. Facebook started at Harvard in 2004 and quickly spread to other Ivy League universities, before becoming a fixture in colleges across the country. Nowadays it is being embraced by businesses as a way to network. It has met with controversy, though; certain businesses have banned Facebook in the workplace because reports have shown some employees’ productivity has fallen as a result of “hanging out” on the site while on the job.

“If you’re a product company you can find a specific demographic and advertise directly to them through Facebook,” Prakash said. “The Procter and Gambles and Starbucks out there farm this info out to their clients.”

In addition to using Facebook to keep in touch with friends and colleagues, Prakash uses the Six Degrees of Separation group on LinkedIn to track former classmates and even job prospects.

“If your prospect is that important you can find out more about them through Six Degrees,” Prakash said. “You’d be surprised how much business is being done lately that way.”

At Hinge, in Herndon, part of Sylvia Montgomery’s job as Marketing Counsel is to work with companies that want to outsource their marketing, and these efforts include social networking. Her firm’s many clients include technology companies CGI and Digicon.

“We work on strategy, audience messaging and positioning,” Montgomery said.

She said social media is just one component of her marketing plan for a client. “As with anything in marketing, there isn’t a silver bullet. Social media is good for advancing leads and getting more information about someone from a site like LinkedIn. At the end of the day, it’s marketing online. It’s great for increasing visibility.”

One of her tools is setting up “wikis,” collaborative online work environments, an internal tool that she describes as “a fluid intranet,” featuring sections for Human Resources and Marketing, among others. Wikis keep track of who makes changes to an internal document and is especially helpful if a company does not have a shared server.

Another tool Montgomery believes in is blogging.

“The cost is fairly low, as opposed to traditional marketing,” Montgomery said. “You’re not doing media buys, you just start typing. It’s very attractive to small companies who don’t have a budget, as opposed to a Northrop Grumman.”

She said blogging is a way for companies

to address their clients in a unique way.

“At the end of the day, you want the blogs to be intimate, to tell people in the professional services arena how we work, introduce you to different personalities in a company,” Montgomery said.

Blogs are at the heart of Jonathan Aberman’s efforts with the Amplifier Network in McLean. The venture capitalist said he enjoys bringing emerging companies together.

“Amplifier Networks is intended to be

an online community to link entrepreneurs and make them smart,” Aberman said. “I realized at one point that there isn’t an online social community that promotes entrepreneurs.”

Aberman said the Amplifier Network has grown rapidly in the last few months. He utilized the help of iBelong to implement an expanded platform from what he had earlier in the year; now his forum features RSS feeds, edited feeds and more content that would interest entrepreneurs. He said he’s very excited by the potential for

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—**Sylvia Montgomery**
Hinge



MySpace

Facebook overtook previous social networking champion MySpace. For many in social networking, this is where it all began. With roughly 118 million unique visitors in June 2008, MySpace is still the preferred place many go to chat with friends, blog and discover new music. MySpace is less restrictive than Facebook in terms of privacy and connectivity; if you know a user’s name you can see their page and all their posts, whether you know them or not. Where Facebook has differed greatly from MySpace is that Facebook has rocketed into the business arena, and MySpace has not (yet). Few people will say they made business contacts through MySpace, as it is still primarily a place where your teenage children talk to each other. MySpace is owned by News Corporation, particularly, Fox Interactive Media.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is often called “Facebook for grown-ups.” It’s more of a place to post your resume online and to make new business contacts and less of a Web site to blog or share music/videos. This is the place most people go when they want to check out a new business contact they’ve met, or a potential job hire. Users can join groups and reconnect with classmates or former business colleagues. There is also a section called LinkedIn Answers, a spot where people post questions to the community in search of valid responses and expertise.

Bebo

This is a name you’ll be hearing more of in 2009, especially if you’re an AOL user. Bebo is a social networking service owned by AOL that has achieved great success in Europe. It was founded by an English couple who reportedly made \$595 million on the deal after selling to AOL earlier this year. Expect AOL Instant Messenger to be fused with Bebo, the latter having many of the same features as Facebook and MySpace.

Friendster

Another social networking service, Friendster is the most popular social networking site in Asia. It is estimated that nearly 90 percent of Internet users in the Philippines have Friendster accounts. Friendster is what it sounds like -- a way to make friends and find activity partners on the Internet.

"Friend" as a Verb

Speaking of friends, you may have already started hearing people using "friend" as a verb. As in, "May I friend you on Facebook?" which means, "May I become your friend?" Just like "impact" has somehow become a verb to many, so has "friend."

Blog vs. Web site vs. Facebook

Now that many of the social media terms have been defined, what is the difference between these three? A blog is a web log, like a diary. It is personal and tends to be someone's or some entity's running commentary, a statement of daily, ongoing opinions. A Facebook page is much more of an interactive personal homepage, with people "writing" on each other's "walls," or leaving messages for each other. People may still use Facebook as a blog but it is more about interpersonal communication than personal expression. A Web site tends to be more static, with a company or organization using it as a portal for information about its goods or services. Web sites may also contain blogs but that is usually not their main focus.

Viral Marketing

This is marketing that is done through the web that is so fast and so compelling that it spreads like a virus. When people say they want something to "go viral," this is what they mean. The problem with viral marketing is that, like a virus, you don't know how fast it's going to spread and potentially how much damage it may do.

social networking and thinks his platform will help grow the technology corridor in Northern Virginia.

"The real reason I did this, is that typically in a given week we meet five to seven entrepreneurs and at most I give three people money in 12 months' time. This (network) now allows me to help a lot more people efficiently. It's a good example of how you allow people to disseminate information and build their business from there."

Aberman discussed how he has "created a feedback loop," a crucial way for entrepreneurs to counsel each other while they are in various stages of progress. This, in his mind, goes beyond what a typical blog does.

"I write a blog and that's interesting to some people, but what's really interesting is when they comment on it," Aberman said. "As I write new blog entries, people are

looking for clarity and calmness in a sea of lunacy. That's the feedback loop."

The merits of social networking may be clear, but how would a company embark on joining a social networking site, say Facebook? Prakash said any company, large or small, needs only to follow some simple steps:

"First, you need a logo. Then you need to invite people. If your group is open to anybody, send a mass email to people you know. They'd have to be approved when they request membership and then you have a Facebook community. Going forward, you just have to manage the changes of who's joined and who's left the group. It's free."

Prakash added that the same steps may be used to set up groups on LinkedIn,

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which is different from Facebook in one key way.

“LinkedIn is not a marketing thing, it’s kind of a knowledge base,” Prakash said. “You don’t need to search Google when you have LinkedIn.” Prakash is referring to LinkedIn’s Q&A feature, which provides a forum for members to ask and answer questions of any other member — instant access to expertise in any field. “I’m seeing a trend in this — the feature Q&A is more powerful and that’s LinkedIn-specific,” says Prakash. “We’ve done a lot of hiring from LinkedIn and most of all have made connections on the business development side.”

While LinkedIn may help with the hiring process, would a company have to increase staff to make social media work for them?

“The costs of labor are high, for blog-

ging specifically,” Montgomery said. “To be really active in blogging you have to post one to three entries a week and that takes effort. Professionals’ time is very precious and blogging takes a long time.”

Montgomery suggested that companies might hire freelancers for blogging needs, so as not to use full-time staff on such endeavors. She cautioned that freelancers would probably not understand a company as well as full-timers would, though, and thus the “intimacy” of a blog could be jeopardized.

Another question frequently asked about the social media movement is the same one that has been asked since the Internet was developed: what do you do about nasty comments made online? It’s a well-known fact that many people hide behind a cloak of anonymity on the World Wide Web to say things they would never say in person to someone or in polite company. What if you create a Facebook group and the feedback isn’t what you expected, or wanted?

“If you were on Facebook you could create a discussion board with a topic, for instance, ‘How are people finding good talent?’” Prakash said. “You have control over who’s on the discussion board, complete control. If you get bad apples in your community, bad press, you deal with that.”

Prakash said she’s found that on corporate sites, users tend to rally to the defense of the leader of the site. For example, if Microsoft has a Facebook group, presumably people come to the site to talk positively about Microsoft products, and “bad apples” that post negative comments get scorned by the other members.

“If you get negative comments you either address it in some way or you post them yourself and you have your community respond,” Prakash said. “What you can’t do is delete the bad comments. This is the Web and you can’t cook the books.”

Aberman also shared some of Prakash’s concerns.

“It’s chaotic. For people who control messages it can be chaotic. You have to be

All I Have to Do is Meme

Somewhat in the “viral” area, a meme (rhymes with dream) is an idea that catches on, is built upon and people run with it. Simply put, a meme is an idea that spreads. Memetics, or the study of memes as cultural evolutionary indicators, has been around for a long time, but with the growth of social media the idea of “memes” has become common parlance in the Web arena.

Status message

In instant messaging (IM), a status message is a brief communication that may be sent to someone trying to contact you, like an out-of-office response. In the Facebook world, a status message is more like a tagline; when you look up a friend, you see the person’s status message after their name, for instance, “So-and-so feels happy today.”

Delicious

Formerly del.icio.us, Delicious is a social media site that is useful in storing your bookmarks efficiently. If you want to set an Internet bookmark you can easily save it to your own computer—but by saving it to Delicious you can store your bookmarks online and access them from any computer. Definitely handy when working at multiple work stations.

I can Digg it!

You often see Digg alongside Delicious on many news sites or blogs. Digg is a Web site made for people to share news and information with anyone on the Internet. Users vote for which stories they find the most interesting in a process called digging or burying. If you dig a story, it rises to the top of popularity. If you bury it, the story tumbles to the bottom of the popularity heap. Digg has been criticized for allowing users to have too much control over the site, thus resulting in the most sensational stories rising to the top. Also, some have claimed that only a small niche group controls the vast majority of content.



Social Media Optimization

This is about making sure your social media content reaches the widest possible audience. For example, you could take a blog posting on your company's Web site and submit it to Digg, or make it part of an RSS feed (a news and information feed that streams on your Web site). Another example is posting your video on someone else's Web site.

Social Media Press Release

The "new wave" of press releases, social media press releases are one way to optimize your social media information. The jury is out as to whether this type of release actually promotes a company or organization better than a regular release, but the gist is this: instead of paragraphs, use bullet points to convey information, then post the release on Digg or a similar site. Embed any video into the release and use certain keywords that may turn up in the blogosphere (the amorphous universe where bloggers chat about goings-on of the day). Then wait to be "discovered."

By the time you read this article, there may be more hot buzzwords to have hit the streets (or blogosphere, as it were). One thing that you can count on in 2009 and into the next decade: social media will continue to expand and companies will continue to jump on the bandwagon. It will be interesting to see in 2018 how many of these terms and Web sites are still in general use.

—Art Swift

tolerant of openness on the Internet. But you have to realize, when it's on the Internet you can't get it back. It's there forever and you can't get it back. So businesses that don't want to run the risk, they shouldn't do that."

And "not getting it back" also applies to job seekers who have Facebook pages and are looking for employment, Montgomery said.

"The twentysomethings who were cool to post things online in college may not be so cool in landing a job," Montgomery said. "Facebook is great for recruiting but, in a way, also great for eliminating potential candidates."

Aberman said that companies using social media have to be careful in knowing what kind of users are out there. More than in "traditional" marketing, in social media honesty and transparency are at a premium.

"People who control this medium are young and don't like to be manipulated with advertising," Aberman said.

Aberman argued that larger companies or organizations should be selective in who they allow to join and what kinds of discussions are allowed, if the company is committed to controlling their message as much as possible.

However, Prakash said concerns about anonymous "attacks" or "flames" on businesses are unfounded because on sites like Facebook or LinkedIn, people have to use their real names. She said they might be a little bolder online but not as much as if they were anonymous or had invented an alternate persona.

"If managed properly, it provokes discussion and will generate leads for a company, and that will advance the company," Prakash said.

Obviously, there are pros and cons to social media and it is a form of communication that will undoubtedly evolve as time goes on. For many that is what's so inviting about it, the potential for growth and adaptation. Companies are probably wise to remember

what Montgomery pointed out, that there is no "silver bullet" in any type of marketing. She added that using social media is no guarantee of success.

"It doesn't generate leads if you just post a blog or if you put your profile into LinkedIn," Montgomery said. "There's no guarantee in generating business."

Still, Montgomery believes social media can be a valuable arrow in a company's quiver.

"Traditional marketing needs to be first," Montgomery said. "I would step back and realize there are other things you need to do before social media, and if you look at it in that context, it can be quite valuable."

So is it a fad?

"My opinion is that it is not a fad," Montgomery said. "Right now it has a fadish feel but it will settle down. It's the new wave of marketing and right now we don't know what the return on investment will be. It's here to stay and it makes sense."

Montgomery said she subscribes to social media site Twitter for CNN and believes that to be the perfect fit. She said for CNN it's inexpensive and an easy way to reach people. Those are the kinds of connections that companies need to make—ways that social media can be indispensable in marketing efforts.

Social media has already proven its intrinsic value on the biggest stage of all—the 2008 Presidential campaign. Incoming President Barack Obama's campaign not only raised tens of millions of dollars through social networking, but it also mobilized volunteers through sites like Facebook and MySpace who wouldn't be reached normally. The Obama campaign provided a model that will undoubtedly be copied and improved upon in future elections.

But back in Northern Virginia, on a smaller scale, Jonathan Aberman says the Amplifier Network is a way to strengthen the technology region here as a whole.

"I think this can be a major technology corridor and to do that we need more entrepreneurs. I hope to help with that."

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