

Harnessing the power of social media to build your business

by Mark Mahoney

Tweeting and FBing are common activities and well-known phrases among the 'socially' in-the-know: Specifically the 'social media' in-the-know. If you're in the dark about what these terms are all about, chances are you are missing the social media craze and the many social media vehicles that are out there.

What is social media?

Social media is the latest way that people are discovering, sharing, and reading information of all kinds from a broad range of sources. Social media has blended sociology and technology to transform the way people communicate and interact. Social media operates on social media networks. These are Internet sites — web-based tools and services — that are designed with the purpose of helping people and companies connect and interact instantaneously and with asynchronous feedback. (Asynchronous feedback is response that happens subsequent to the original communication.)



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Can social media outlets help you generate leads and increase your enrollment? I believe they can.

Here I will provide you with very basic profiles of some of the social media sites and tools available free of charge and introduce you to ways that you can begin to use them to increase your enrollment and maintain your currently enrolled families. My hope is that I can turn your social media light on and inspire you to use social media in marketing your business.

Social media sites

Listed and described below are the most used social media sites. As of January 2010, Facebook claimed that 50% of active users log into the site each day. This would mean at least 175 million users every 24 hours. This is a considerable increase from the previous 120 million. Facebook currently has in excess of 350 million active users on a global basis. In mid-2009, this figure was 250 million. This translates into approximately a 40% increase in users within a 6-month timeframe. In March 2010, Facebook reached an important milestone by surpassing Google in the United States for the first time as the most visited website in a particular week. This translates into

rapid growth in marketshare for Facebook as well, climbing from just over 2% to 7.07% in a one year time period (culminating in March 2010) giving Facebook a .04% advantage over Google for the first time.

Twitter claims to have 75 million user accounts, but only around 15 million are active users on a regular basis. It's still a notable increase from the estimated 6-10 million global users reported a few months ago.

LinkedIn boasts more than 50 million members worldwide. This shows an increase of approximately 1 million members month-on-month since July / August of 2009.

Facebook — www.facebook.com

Briefly defined: Formatted social networking site open to anyone over 13.

How it works: Uses include status updates, photo/video sharing, event update and invitations, interactive quizzes, and search capabilities. Use to connect with members of your center and other registered businesses and utilize to reach potential members.

Twitter — www.twitter.com

Briefly defined: Micro-Blogging site that allows you to share your business news with others in 140 characters or less.

Social Media Site	URL	Brief Definition	How it Works
Facebook	www.facebook.com	Formatted social networking site open to anyone over 13.	Uses include status updates, photo/video sharing, event update and invitations, interactive quizzes, and search capabilities. Use to connect with members of your center and other registered businesses and utilize to reach potential members.
Twitter	www.twitter.com	Micro-Blogging site that allows you to share your business news with others in 140 characters or less.	Based on the idea of ‘following people,’ Twitter lets you search for a member and ‘follow’ them through updates via e-mail or text message when a new post is made.
YouTube	www.youtube.com	An internet platform for posting self-made or production-quality videos.	Anyone can search and view posted videos; Logged-in members can post comments about videos. Use to post examples of classroom strategies or training opportunities or to highlight events or staff accomplishments.
LinkedIn	www.linkedin.com	A business relationship connection tool that allows “A” to meet “C” through “B.”	Based on the concept of enabling introductions through common contacts. This site provides greater web presence control and outreach potential than the others mentioned.
Classmates.com	www.classmates.com	Connects people based on their association with a school, work, or military.	Search for others based on an association.
Delicious	www.delicious.com/	Social bookmarking web service for storing, sharing, and discovering web bookmarks.	Post reference information for a particular subject using images, videos, links, text, etc.
MySpace	www.myspace.com	Formatted social networking site open to anyone over 13.	Uses include status updates, photo/video sharing, event update and invitations, interactive quizzes, and search capabilities. Use to connect with members of your center and other registered businesses and utilize to reach others.
StumbleUpon	www.stumbleupon.com	A discovery engine that finds the best of the web, recommended to each unique user.	Discovers new, relevant content for you based on your interests and makes it easy to bookmark and share.
“Complete” List of Social Media Sites – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_website			

jargon: You are using ‘viral’ marketing to get your message out. That means your message will not only spread from friend to friend, but will spread ‘infectiously’ into your friends’ networks and into the networks of friends of your friends and so on. I think you get the picture.

Social media also can be used for emergency notifications and alerts such as center closings, or program cancellations because of illness or weather, and website maintenance schedules. Think of it as an avenue to immediate visibility with your contacts.

Website promotion. A less obvious use of social media is sharing your URL. This

is important because it gets your social media network involved with your website. Let’s look at using Twitter and Facebook for sharing your early childhood program and generating leads.

■ **Twitter.** To create a connection between your website and Twitter, suggest that your visitor follow you in the anchor text of a link, and then direct the link to your Twitter profile.

■ **Facebook.** Share your website by using [www.facebook.com/share.php?u=\(the URL for your website\)](http://www.facebook.com/share.php?u=(the URL for your website)). When your visitors share your link on Facebook, it appears on their profile pages and on the Facebook

home-pages of some of your visitors’ friends.

- Your center can create a Fan Page using Facebook and send your currently enrolled families there instead of joining your friend network. This allows you to maintain a professional relationship with them and to keep your circle of friends strictly limited to your actual friends.

Twitter and Facebook can add a new layer to your Internet marketing efforts by helping you lure people to your site through the networks of your friends and their friends. And they can increase

your site traffic (the number of visitors to your site) if you make it easy for your users to share your site in their tweets and on their pages.

Blogs

These social media tools can seal your social media success. There are tools available to build blogs (see comparison). Many of these are free, easy-to-use, and can help you create a very professional blog. You can also use your Facebook Fan Page as your blog.

Blogs allow you to create a virtual highway into your website that will help you establish yourself as an authority in the early childhood field. Establishing expertise is a 'must' that social media gurus recommend in building your networks.

Blog tools, such as the Facebook-Twitter links, help you build bridges between your social media outlets and your website. You can simply post news and link to resources that your readers may find valuable (such as your website). You can post articles that you have written that share your expertise.

Blog sites are separate from your website, so they can contain content that you may not want to include on your site, but would like your network to have. Blogs also allow you to use interesting themes to build follower networks. This is a powerful way to develop relationships even before your readers become customers.

Sharing pictures and videos

Social media also allows you to publish pictures and videos. Facebook has an entire photo section as well as a video posting area. YouTube is probably the most widely known and posts videos so that you can immediately see what the content is. This is a great place to share videos of your events, award ceremo-

Social Media Mini-Glossary

Blog — A web page that serves as a publicly accessible, interactive presentation of information for an individual, business, or organization that is generally offered in a more casual and spontaneous manner than a website. Blogging is the activity of creating blogs and participating in commenting on blogs. A Blogger is a person who participates in posting comments on a blog.

Facebook — A social network or utility on the Internet that enables people to connect with friends and others who work, study, and live around them and share information.

FBing — Shortened version of the verb, Facebooking. Those who participate in the activities available on Facebook.

Facebook Status Updates — Facebook provides an area on an individual's, organization's, or business's page where the 'owner' of the page can provide those who read their page with frequent alerts as to what they are doing, thinking, or planning.

Instant Messaging — Real-time (immediate) text communication between two or more people using personal computers or other devices.

IMing — Shortened expression for the activity of creating and sending an Instant Message.

Microblog — Much the same as a blog but everything is presented on a smaller scale using brief phrases and sentences and posting small files.

Social Bookmarking — A method for Internet users to organize, store, manage and search for bookmarks of resources online.

Social Media — Media (communications tools) used for social interaction on the Internet using web-based technologies to create and broadcast a variety of elements such as messages, pictures, videos, and web links.

Tags — Brief descriptive phrases or words that are used in social media to help items on social media sites get found in Internet searches.

Texting — Short for Text Messaging refers to the exchange of brief written messages between fixed-line or mobile phones or portable devices over a network.

Twitter — Website offering social networking and microblogging that enable users to send and read other users' messages, which are called Tweets. Tweets are fairly brief text-based posts displayed on the user's page. Tweeting is the activity of posting a message or Tweet on Twitter.

URL — The address of a web page on the World Wide Web used in the Internet browser to find a particular website.

Viral Marketing — Utilizes social media to distribute a particular message. It is 'viral' in nature because one person passes the message on to another who passes it on to another and so on.

nies, or special occasions at your center. Be sure to only post items that present your center or program and those who are in the video in the best possible light. Once you tag your post, it will appear in search engines when people search on any of the terms you use, so put a lot of thought into your tags. Tags that are too specific will require that searchers know about you. More general terms will attract those who may need to know about you!

Professional networking

Professional networking is very important to you and LinkedIn is a great tool for becoming introduced into high-value relationships. Not only can you find professional contacts that can be valuable to your business, but you can view the contacts of your connections and

ask them to make introductions for you. You can connect with media and advertising contacts, vendors, other center owners and program administrators, and others who provide products and services for your potential customers.

Creating a presence is important

Using social media networks should be a vital part of your marketing plan, so go about it strategically, as you would any other effort that impacts your business growth. Here are some guidelines for a Social Media Strategy:

Go at it with a plan. Decide what kind of image you want to project and how much information you want to share. You might consider sharing new program offerings,

new facilities, recent event news, or upcoming activities.

Create a measure of your effectiveness. Monitor your website to see if visits jump, but benchmark your traffic prior to beginning new activity. Good information on measuring your social media activity can be found at www.ragan.com. Information about the latest on social media's use by businesses can be found at www.businesscommunicationblog.com.

Check yourself. Anything and everything that you post will be viewed/read by someone. Anything negative will most likely reach the subject through their social network — or word-of-mouth!

Make this one person's responsibility. You wouldn't have multiple people overseeing payroll so don't do it with your social media strategy either. Make sure your team agrees on the content you want out there. You can use a consistent message for multiple locations. For example, your lead person may e-mail your Social Media Team (SMT) and ask them to post their attached content on or by a specific date. This ensures that your news breaks evenly — and consistently — across sites.

Check out the competition. Use groups and searching areas of the sites to 'listen in' on your competition by viewing articles, events, awards, and new program offerings in your business sector. These sites help you learn about these things before your own customers tell you! To find items, you can search on "child care" in a Twitter account and bring up a vast array of 'tweets' that are relative to your search term. These searches are global in nature and reach far outside your own circle of influence. Make your

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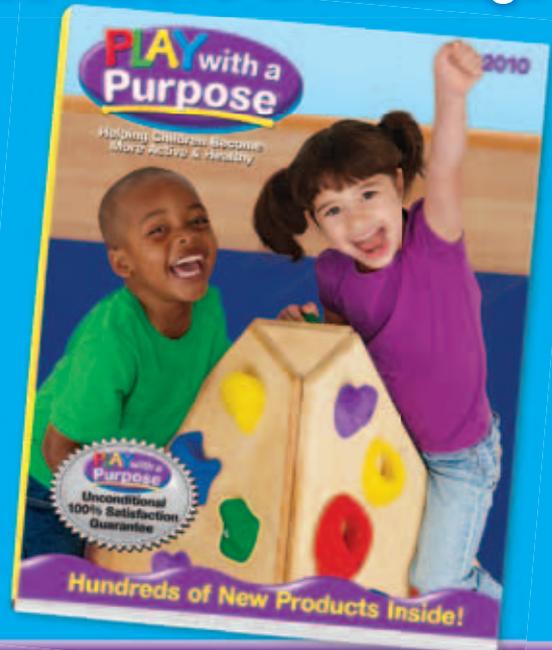


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search more relevant to you by including your city after your general search word. "Child care in Minneapolis" for example, would result in tweets that concern any post that talks about child care services and is in Minneapolis.

Be a Blogger. If you have the ability to create a Blog in your website, you can also have your SMT post news and information on it. Be sure to use key words that will help search engines find you.

Monitor results and replicate success. Regardless of how many activities you launch, monitor how they are working. Get feedback: Find out from your SMT

what people are saying on posts, identify website traffic increases and track, through your registrar, how people indicate that they found out about you on the Internet. Does your center's name show up in any new places when you search it? After a reasonable timeframe — perhaps 3-6 months — review the information you've collected to evaluate your social media efforts. Determine which activities you will continue based on the results that seem worth the efforts of your team. The services are free, but you don't want your team's valuable time to be consumed by site updates and site activities. Also make sure that your team members are working for you and are not spending time on their personal social media presences.

Make sure your social media light is on

It is really quite simple. Your customers probably have several options for getting the services that you provide. Use social media to make your center the one that is on the tips of their tongues and the choice that is the most relevant to their lifestyles.

Learn more about all that is social media by visiting www.mashable.com — the Social Media Guide. It is a great place to get a handle on what is available to you in the world of social media.

Visit us online: www.ChildCareExchange.com