

the new networking

online social media turn personal connections into professional allies.

by cheryl weber

Marketing is a chore for most residential architects, who would rather draw than dream up ways to attract new business. It's easier to rely on word-of-mouth advertising and the casual connections formed at kids' soccer games, dinner parties, and board meetings. Conventional wisdom says that personal networking is, in fact, the most powerful marketing tool there is. Consumers place far more trust in people they know than they do in advertising messages, and that explains the growing number of companies turning to online social media—blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and the like—to generate interest in their work. There's a lot of hype around online schmoozing, to be sure, and some see it as a trendy Internet time drain. But there's evidence that it can be a powerful professional ally—especially for small firms and independent practitioners, for whom each connection is a multipliable building block.

So many people now socialize online that the local Chamber of Commerce mixer seems positively “old



Michael Austin

school.” Facebook alone saw a 116 percent jump in membership from September 2007 to September 2008, according to Nielsen Online. And Twitter has grown tenfold over the past year, a comScore analysis showed. When you consider the thousands of businesses that host Facebook groups, thereby creating an online community of people who

share their interests, it's clear that social media is catching on with business in a big way.

A mid-2008 study by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research bears this out. A survey of the Inc. 500—a list of the fastest-growing privately held companies in the United States compiled annually

by *Inc.* magazine—showed that their use of online social media doubled between 2007 and 2008. Thirty-nine percent of the companies were blogging in 2008, up from 19 percent in 2007.

Social media is still in its nascent stages, and not yet second nature for many design firms. But some are figuring out how to use it

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judiciously. One example is Charlottesville, Va., architect Lance Hosey, AIA, LEED AP, a former director at William McDonough + Partners. Last fall he set up a Facebook page for *Women in Green*, the book he co-authored with Kira Gould, to spread the word about the topic. Feedback poured in so quickly that within months it had attracted several hundred fans—mostly people he didn't know. Besides the page's direct marketing value, the comments left by viewers are more illuminating than sales figures alone. An added bonus: It's easier to set up and amend than a website.

Last year, Hosey also created a personal Facebook

page that, he's discovered, adds color to his professional life. "I joined because family and friends were pressuring me, but I immediately realized the value of it," he says. For Hosey, it's the chance to get to know workaday peers as real people. "Someone can announce that she's just won a design competition or launched a new book, and in the same day say she's overcoming a cold and frantic about meeting a deadline. In moderation, mixing the personal and professional can be a good thing. If people know me from my résumé, they only see one side of me."

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New York City, thinks so too. She and co-principal Michi Yanagishita created LUNCH, a blog that reveals bits of their style in a way that a portfolio could not. The luscious photos and mini-musings on repasts ranging from lamb saagwala to apple puff pastry are "a reminder to stop, chill, breathe in fresh air, and most importantly—eat,"

according to the website. Ha says a lot of clients are fascinated by it, and it may explain some of the restaurant projects that are starting to come their way. "It helps, for someone whose portfolio is low on restaurant work, that clients coming in are saying, 'Oh, you guys really like to eat.'" The pair also ties

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Front Studio to Twitter, using it to remark on an interesting design they've seen or something delicious they've just eaten. "I think for a lot of designers, the Web presence is just a way of making little comments here and there that reflect your personality and design sensibilities," Ha says.

virtual chatter

Online social networking's other essential beauty is that it unlocks geography, making it attractive to architects with a national and international range. For example, Chris Pardo—whose Seattle firm, Pb Elemental Architecture, has work in China, Hong Kong, and South America

—uses a combination of blog submittals, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter for publicity. He hooks up with developers and sub-consultants on LinkedIn, a strategy that paid off when he landed a client through a Realtor who had requested a connection. In addition, five new clients found Pardo through his year-old Facebook page, but it's the blogs that have had the biggest ripple effect.

Blogging is easy on the budget, so it's perfect for small firms. And it's more believable and engaging to the viewer than most other forms of advertising. In short, it's a way to push news at people who've volunteered to read it. In

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—gregory la vardera

Pardo's case, though, the blogs are less personal and more project-focused. "We identified people who blog about architecture and asked if they were interested in our projects," he says. The firm regularly uploads photos of work under way to blog sites such as Contemporist

(www.contemporist.com), Offbeat Homes (<http://offbeathomes.com>), archiCentral (www.archicentral.com), Studio House Design (www.studiohousedesign.com), and ArchDaily (www.archdaily.com). "We're probably on 100 different sites, because

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once you get on one blog site, another blog sees it and asks for permission from that blog to put it on their site,” he says. “That’s how we got onto international blogs. It catches on without us having to submit to them.”

Likewise, for architects who package and sell their house designs, the blogosphere is a dream marketing machine. When Interface Studio Architects principal Brian Phillips, AIA, LEED AP, joined developer Chad Ludeman to create the 100K House—a production model for small, green urban infill housing in Philadelphia—Ludeman’s blog quickly became a feedback loop. “We got very excited about the ongoing focus group that unfolded,” Phillips says. “A rendering would go up, and people would comment on it.” Ludeman, the founder of Postgreen, then set up Facebook and Twitter fan pages to keep people connected. Several houses have presold, and “the next step will be a website that allows people to put together a house like you put together a Dell computer, by choosing pieces and getting pricing feedback,” Phillips says.

In this case, the blog is a powerful forum for touting an innovative concept—the housing equivalent of a Prius—at the right cultural and economic moment. “The thing we’re excited about with the 100K House

through the media portal

Does one have to be a tireless self-promoter to be an online social networker? Not really. Just be yourself—and beware of any skeletons in the company closet, says Frederic Brunel, associate professor of marketing at the Boston University School of Management. Online social networking is really consumer-mediated marketing, which means the consumer controls the message, he says. “The paradigm change is something that companies have to come to terms with; you can’t play in that space with the old rules.”

In this public forum, comments from a disgruntled client or neighborhood association can backfire. “If you have a dirty house, don’t open the door,” Brunel says. “Make sure you’ve cultivated a customer base that’s connected to you at an emotional and a rational level.” It’s also a system that behooves you to be honest. If you’re participating in an online discussion with homeowners doing remodeling projects, make sure you’re speaking from an architect’s perspective, but not directly trying to sell your services. “Engage them as an adviser and participant in the discussion,” Brunel says. “It’s not like direct marketing where you expect a 3 percent return; it takes place on a deeper, and often more powerful, level.”

A company Facebook page can boost business, but there must be a compelling reason to friend it, he continues. One idea: Develop video or photo essays of a project you’re working on and let your client show the link to friends. Likewise, a blog must have meaningful content. And you have to accept feedback. “Some companies that didn’t want to give up control have censored negative posts,” Brunel says. “It takes 24 hours to 48 hours for [an online] community to figure it out.”

Online social media’s other potential advantage is its possibilities for inviting community input in planning multifamily projects. “Taking advantage of Web 2.0 means that consumers are creating content, instead of just being consumers of content,” Brunel explains. “It’s collaborative in nature, and in many ways the rules are still being redefined.”—*c.w.*

blog,” Phillips adds, “is that it’s related to a project. We thought about doing a blog for the office, but do you really want everyone to know what’s happening in the office every day?”

Probably not, says David Andreozzi, AIA,

of Barrington, R.I.-based Andreozzi Architects. He rejects the idea of a blog for his high-end market. But, like Phillips and Ludeman, he does chat online about his emerging sideline developing modest house plans for sale. ”I

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want people to see that there's a lot more to architecture than just drafting a house," he says. "It's a fun way to teach people about what goes into good design."

Both Andreozzi and Merchantville, N.J., architect Gregory La Vardera enlist social media platforms to plug the Congress of Residential Architecture (CORA). In addition to the website message board and LinkedIn, La Vardera recently started CORA groups on Facebook and on Flickr, where like-minded architects can post images of their best work and tag them so they come up in other searches. In addition to an office blog, La Vardera has two Twitter accounts; one feeds into his Facebook page, the other to LinkedIn. Through these venues, which he, too, uses to promote house plans, he's landed a couple of custom home commissions.

La Vardera started leaving comments on message boards in 2000, not only to cultivate a Web presence but to stave off the isolation of solo practice. "It's a big part of my daily routine," he says. "I read certain websites for design news and link interesting things from my Twitter feed or blog. I have this reflex now where I share it if it's interesting. As a sole practitioner, that stream of links is part of my work community."

If there's a leading

light in the online design community, it's Michelle Kaufmann, AIA, LEED AP. Although she announced in late May the closing of her eponymous firm—the latest casualty of the credit crisis—her fan base was stronger than ever. Kaufmann was far ahead of her colleagues in

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embracing multiple media outlets to beam out her firm's mission of making sustainable design accessible through simple and stylish modular homes. An early adopter of Twitter and Facebook, she also spent about six hours a week blogging and posted Martha Stewart-style videos of green-it-yourself projects on YouTube. She mastered a down-to-earth conversational style, often translating her design principles into ideas people could apply to their own homes. Response was gratifying. In 18 months, her YouTube channel on green living attracted nearly 2,300 subscribers and 67,000 viewers.

Coming up with fresh video material meant that Kaufmann and her staff

were constantly multi-tasking. "Producing your own videos is not for the faint of heart," she admits. "One needs to be pretty dedicated and kind of crazy." But she views her parallel online persona as that of an educator. "Some people teach at universities; we made the decision to

use those resources at the public level," she says, adding that people are clambering for alternatives to energy-hungry homes. "If we don't start [offering sustainable solutions], we'll become obsolete," she says of the profession. "It extends to using nontraditional modes of communication."

a matrix of connectivity

Other architects and designers are channeling the power of online media toward a social cause. Design Corps founder and executive director Bryan Bell, Raleigh, N.C., is still testing the waters, but he senses that the shift is inevitable. "I have people showing up for our summer

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student program after just doing a Google search of us,” he says. “It’s amazing how rapidly they seem to absorb information on the Internet.” An employee put up a Facebook page for

Design Corps recently, but Bell hasn’t jumped in yet, for fear it will consume his time. “If I see that it’s not just entertaining but also productive, I’ll be a devotee,” he says.

In garnering support for his nonprofit design work, Bell wants to avoid the glut of unedited self-review that circulates on the Web. Instead, he and like-minded colleagues are trying to

establish credibility through the emerging Social/Economic/Environmental Design (SEED) Network, an interactive matrix that not only facilitates contact-sharing, but also certifies finished projects through an objective review process. “The idea of SEED is that economic and social issues are the second and third leg of sustainability,” Bell says. “Like LEED did for the environment, once you can measure change, you have a real clarity and ability to communicate among yourselves and with the public.”

By contrast, Cameron Sinclair has been canvassing the multitudes electronically for years. For the co-founder of San Francisco-based Architecture for Humanity (AFH), being linked in is less of an ego thing and more about the necessity of running an international nonprofit from the road. In fact, online networking is critical to a decentralized operation like AFH. With 120 chapters around the world, within seconds he can know what’s happening on the ground and react quickly. For example, after a cyclone hit Myanmar in May 2008, followed within days by an earthquake in China, AFH turned to its global network to gauge where to focus its efforts. “People came back overwhelmingly saying that Myanmar needs our help more because of lack of access,” Sinclair says. “It helps us to be very agile in our decision making.”

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Sinclair blogs on The Huffington Post because it gets translated in about 30 dialects, he says. A month into his Twitter account last February, he'd attracted 500 followers and was following 700, ranging from people at nongovernmental and funding organizations to reporters and influential designers. "I'm interested to see what Michelle Kaufmann is doing with innovative design and technology, because she's been doing sustainable design for the top 25 percent of the world and I'm doing it for the bottom 25 percent," he says. "She's one of the most tech-savvy people I know." He, too, is embedding video clips on YouTube; among them is his interview with a citizen journalist at Davos 2009, in which he plugged the Open Architecture Network, his latest brainchild.

"I used to get 250 e-mails a day; now I get about 60 since I moved to social networks," Sinclair says, simultaneously responding to a ping from Italy. Yes, but doesn't a Twitter account mean a lot more messages to answer? It does, except that given the 140-character limit, "rather than someone writing a four-page treatise on what they want to do, they're usually succinct," he says. Social media may still be a time drain, but at least some of it inspires brevity. And in an era of information overload, the ability to distill thoughts to a few short, declarative sentences is something to which we can all aspire. **ra**