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A Chapter of
The American
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By Scott D. Butcher, CPSM

It's hard to avoid social media these days: LinkedIn. Facebook. Twitter. Blogs. YouTube. Flickr. WordPress. Blogger. The list of social media sites goes on and on, and now number in the hundreds. Many of us originally considered social media to be a "kids" activity – high school students on MySpace or college students on Facebook. But something interesting has been happening in recent years: the business world has taken notice – and most of us have, too. The initial business foray into social media was business-to-consumer, and the design community primarily has a business-to-business (B2B) focus, so we've been sitting on the sidelines. But that is changing – the year of 2010 has even been dubbed the year of B2B social media by several media outlets. Web 1.0 was all about static websites that were essentially online brochures. Driven by social media, Web 2.0 is about information exchange and social networking. The AEC industry has traditionally been conservative when it comes to marketing (in fact, before 1978 it was considered unethical for architects to advertise), but

a growing number of design firms have ventured into social media in recent years. Organizations like the American Institute of Architects have encouraged this, offering recommendations online and hosting a monthly Tweetchat.

Social media is not a replacement for traditional marketing; it is merely another tool in the toolbox. And if you think, "my clients aren't on Twitter" (I've said that many times myself), you are missing the point. Social Media is not about who you know – it is about who knows you. Several public and private owners/clients at a recent Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) event were asked if they used social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter), and they unanimously said "no." But after further questioning, it was revealed that some of their staff members do in fact use social media – they check out blogs to find thought leaders (and potential A/E firms) and use social media sites to check up on firms and individuals they are interviewing or working with on a project. Your social media presence networks you with people you don't know and expands your reach.

So how can you effectively utilize social media without spending too much time on it? If you are not on LinkedIn, you need to be there. Potential clients and potential employees are already looking for you there. Get on LinkedIn, and be active. Find people you

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know and connect with them. Find people you'd like to know, and see who knows them. Join groups, follow discussions, and participate whenever there is an opportunity. Locally, a great place to start is by joining the South Central PA AEC Industry Networking Group, which has around 200 members. The group meets monthly throughout central PA – real-world connections are being made every month through social media. Create a personal account, and make sure your company has a LinkedIn page, too.

Check out Twitter. Create a handle and begin following people, companies, and organizations. Watch the conversations (in 140 characters, or less). It is okay to “lurk” without participating. Seek out other architectural firms that have active Twitter presences – or engineers or contractors. Watch an AIA Chat to see how Twitter is being used. As I'm writing this article, I'm monitoring the monthly AIA Tweetchat – this month the topic is pro bono work; last month it was BIM.

And then there is the ubiquitous Facebook. Most people in the AEC industry I know use LinkedIn for professional connections and Facebook for personal connections. AEC companies who utilize Facebook primarily do so as either a staff communications tool or an employee recruitment tool. If you are just getting into social media for your company, I suggest you skip Facebook and focus on (1) LinkedIn, (2) blogging, and (3) Twitter.

I'll leave you with one final thought. Social media is becoming a tool for direct communication, too. I have two prospects (owners) that I communicate with via direct LinkedIn messages, not through e-mail. A direct message is between two people, and not viewable to your followers or connections. I have an architect friend who communicates with me via Facebook. And when a governmental client wanted to contact me recently, he did so via a Twitter direct message. You need to make yourself available where your clients want you to be.

For more information on this topic contact Scott Butcher at JDB Engineering or email him at sbutcher@jdbengineering.com.

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Reference sites:

<http://www.twitter.com>

Free micro-blogging community

<http://business.twitter.com/twitter101/>

Twitter for Business guide

<http://www.linkedin.com>

Free business-focused social networking community

<http://www.facebook.com>

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<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

Free audio mixing software

<http://www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc/AIAB080126?dvid=&recspec=AIAB080126> – AIA article, “Ten Tips for Using Twitter to Support Your Practice”

<http://www.aia.org/practicing/groups/kc/AIAB080127?dvid=&recspec=AIAB080127> – AIA article, “Are you LinkedIn? Using LinkedIn to Find Clients, Colleagues and Consultants”

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