

# Social media making inroads into business community

Do you tweet? No, it's not some reference to the song "Rockin' Robin" or some alliterative phrase directed at a "bad ol' puddy cat."

Rather a "tweet," a digital message of up to 140 characters, is among a burgeoning number of social networks available to businesses that range from Twitter to Talkbiznow, Meettheboss to MySpace. My word.

"It's not a come-in-and-buy-a-car-today tool," said Mary Allemon, marketing director for the Gary Lang Auto Group in McHenry. "We see it as a customer relationship. ... It's more informative about new products, what is going on at the dealership; be it a Mitsubishi grand opening, other transactions or special rebates. If we're looking to buy a used car and want to check out our inventory, they can find out about that as well."

Allemon said the dealership ratcheted up its use of social media in the last three months, increasing its digital footprint using a blog, Twitter and Facebook.

"It's really fragmented. Back in the '70s there were three television stations, a few radio stations. Since then the world has changed. Everything has gone into niche markets," Allemon said. "We're in the most popular social media sites, but we can't be in all of them. We don't have unlimited resources and unlimited time."

So how do you pick? Steve Fretzin, president of Sales Results Inc. in Deerfield, said it hinges on what a business is trying to accomplish.

"Are you looking to brand a business, to bring in clients or to proactively go out and find introductions?" Fretzin asked. Facebook and Twitter are more social. LinkedIn has 55 million people who are more business-focused. ...LinkedIn is like a Google for business."

Nick Sarillo – who opened his first Nick's Pizza & Pub in his hometown of Crystal Lake in 1995 and a second in Elgin a decade later – became intrigued by the power of social media after attending a restaurant owners conference last year.

"Especially in the hospitality industry, you need to pay attention to social media. It helps to create a buzz," Sarillo said. "How are people talking about you? It's really not about putting ads on TV anymore."

Nick's now has pages on Digg, Facebook, Twitter, Buzz up. And it regularly monitors others, such as the customer review site Yelp.

"I think what you really want to pay attention to is being transparent," Sarillo said. "I know for a lot of business owners that is scary for them, but I find it the most effective things we do."

## SOCIAL STUDIES

The key is connectivity, experts say. Lang, for example, has linked its Facebook posts with Twitter using an "RSS" feed – short for Really Simple Syndication. It enables a business to post a tweet on their blog or Web site, said Triona Guidry, a computer consultant and Web designer from Cary. "It's nice way to get dynamic content on a Web site without having to go and do it."

It's really a time-saver," she said. "You only have to put in your information once and it all gets updated at the same time; it's all consistent."

Knowem.com allows you to check for the use of your brand, product, personal name or username instantly on more than 350 popular and emerging social media Web sites. And you instantly can check for duplications of your user name at [www.usernamecheck.com](http://www.usernamecheck.com).

Jim Kukral, a small-business consultant from Cleveland, recommended connecting your Twitter account to Facebook so that tweets will appear in your public updates on Facebook. LinkedIn allows you to publish in your profile, synopses of the most recent blog posts on your blog. It also will automatically update your LinkedIn profile with your most recent blog posts, he said.

It's critical to have a consistent name and profile. Select an e-mail address and blog with your company's name as your domain to project a more professional image. For many small businesses their user accounts on social networks will be the highest ranked pages in search results, Kukral said.

"The biggest mistake that small business owners make is that they don't realize that social media can be used for business. Most think that it is for kids. Actually its used to generate return on investment for them. It's natural because it's new and there are not a lot of people who are really doing it yet, in the grand scheme of things, and because there are not a lot of case studies and not a lot of people showing you how to do it," Kukral said. "As a small business owner you are running around like a chicken with your head cut off. You don't have the one basic ingredient that people need to be successful in social media, and that is time."

**April M. Williams**, a cyber consultant and author who teaches social networking classes for businesses at the Shah Center for Corporate Training, said fears about not having time or losing your privacy do not hold up. Properly managed, she said, you can spend less than 15 minutes a day managing your social networking strategy.

And it is time well spent. Williams said there are 300 million active users on Facebook alone.

"If only 10 percent were your target audience, that is still a lot of people," she said. "Facebook saw a 276 percent growth in 35- to 54-year-old users. Almost 38 percent of LinkedIn and 23 percent of Twitter users earn more than \$100,000 a year."

CarMax recently hosted a "Tweet Yourself to a New Ride" contest. Houseal Lavigne Associates, the Naperville-based planning firm hired to complete Huntley's downtown revitalization plan, is soliciting public comment at <http://twitter.com/HuntleyDowntown>. Social media is an essential part of an overall marketing strategy that could include print, audio, video and, undoubtedly, some good old fashioned networking. A recent National Retail Federation survey found that seven out of 10 social media users between the ages of 18-34 regularly use Facebook, but nearly 72 percent say that after an online search they communicate face-to-face about a product or service.

"This is the best thing for small business owners, especially Facebook. I didn't realize the power that these tools have and how important they are. It's not about what I like, it's what my customer likes – whoever my customer is," Williams said. "It's pretty exciting and pretty rewarding to watch people go 'ah hah.' It's like the shades at dawn are opening. You get the shimmer of light."

Sarillo, 47, of Crystal Lake, said his move to social media has evolved as he learned more about it. So much so, that his Crystal Lake restaurant is hosting a social media “lunch and learn” workshop April 27.

“We’ve been doing it well for the last six months, but it took six months to begin getting some traction with it. Like any owner, you get things off the ground and then find a couple of good people in your team and you hand it off to them,” he said. “I have a social media team; two people who are dedicated to it.”

Cory Eigenschenk, while involved with Foursquare and FriendFeed, focuses on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. He is assisted by Stephanie Simpson, when it comes to responding to the variety of comments Nick’s receives from customers.

“The things we found that work are sometimes doing offers that are just for Facebook or just for Twitter. We share knowledgeable stuff. It really keeps people interested and we’re really good at commenting back,” Sarillo said. “We pay attention to what we call level-of-system attention. At one level you have a company voice and sometimes I’ll speak as Nick and sometimes Cory speaks as a team member. ... If we get any negative comments, I get on them right away. Those are the ones I personally answer.”

Sarillo said he jettisoned traditional approaches for its Valentine’s Day party, opting instead for an e-mail blast and social media, to great success. And it was free.

“It’s more than just personal and having fun. It’s really how do I build business, how do I build sales,” Sarillo said. “What I’m seeing is we’re reach out to a segment that is really connecting with them more. Also, it’s a lot better at tracking your return on investment; tracking media impressions. We did a crossword puzzle on Facebook. How many more fans did we build. How many likes? Facebook gives you all of that data.”

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