



REGION: Social media find niches among local businesses

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A source of buzz among marketing professionals since last summer, social networking Web sites are beginning to find varied uses among local businesses.

Those uses vary even more widely than the sites themselves, which include explosively growing newcomers such as Facebook and Twitter, and the older sites MySpace and LinkedIn. While some companies use social media to advertise specific promotions, marketing professionals say the sites are especially effective in allowing customers to interact and to develop a sense of participation.

Facebook has proven particularly popular for catalyzing word-of-"mouth" advertising. On Twitter, which limits posts to 140 characters, a business owner might post a short link to an online news article about her industry. MySpace is popular for announcing band gigs, while LinkedIn has proved useful to job seekers and hiring managers.

Most social networking sites allow users to build personal Web pages where they can post pictures and information about themselves. A user can link his own page to that of an acquaintance, allowing the two to stay abreast of what each other is doing. Some sites, notably Facebook, suggest two users to one another if their profiles put them at the same school or the same employer at the same time.

In the case of Twitter, one user can choose to follow posts by another user without obligating her to follow his own. With most users posting one to five times a day, the sheer volume can be overwhelming. A user typically stays on her own home page, where she sees the latest updates posted by the users she follows.

Thom Curry, who co-owns Temecula Olive Oil Co. with his wife, Nancy, said the process of pressing, blending and infusing olive oils lends itself to frequent "tweets," or Twitter updates.

"Sometimes it'll be four or five times in a day, or six times, if we're doing a crush or something interesting like that," Curry said.

Twitter brings in considerably fewer customers than the company's Web site and other forms of marketing, but they are customers the business probably wouldn't have reached otherwise, Curry

said.

Facebook recently rearranged its format to make users' updates as visible as those on Twitter. Michelle Wright-Taylor, already a regular shopper at Tangerine Clothing Boutique near The Promenade shopping center in Temecula, became [a "fan" of the shop](#) several weeks ago, and now sees its updates when she logs on to Facebook.

Wright-Taylor, a Canyon Lake resident, bought several items last month after the store posted an update about a sale.

Facebook claims 300 million users worldwide, including about 100 million who use it mainly for business. The service doesn't say how actively those people use it; several real estate agencies and other businesses in Southwest County have created Facebook fan pages without registering a fan.

Local businesses don't appear to be using social-networking sites nearly as extensively as residents are. But they're signing on at a rapid pace, and the sheer number of people using the service beckons loudly. MySpace was the fourth-most visited site on the Internet in one recent period, with Facebook at No. 5, according to the HitWise tracking service.

Twitter has also begun to show up on HitWise's lists, thanks to businesses such as Rancho Bernardo Inn, at twitter.com/gmgonemad, and Ashley Furniture in Murrieta, at twitter.com/MurrietaAshley.

Local business owners also struggle to quantify the sites' impact on the bottom line. Most interviewed for this article said their online interactions with customers make them confident that social media will pay off.

It helps that their use of such sites is free except for the time that they and their employees put in. In contrast to Myspace, let alone traditional Web pages such as www.shoptangerine.com, Facebook and Twitter require no knowledge of programming code such as HyperText Markup Language.

That's not to say that all the sites justify the time that owners and employees put into them, which represents a potentially large expense.

Public-relations executive Indra Gardiner said one of her clients, a Solana Beach chocolatier with just a handful of employees, briefly considered Twitter but decided against it because he didn't think he'd be able to post updates often enough.

Instead, they're building a Facebook "fan" page for the business, Jer's Handmade Chocolates. Facebook users typically see text and pictures that their friends post, and the pages where their friends become fans.

"These are all tools, and not every tool is right for every client," Gardiner said.

Gardiner said she met up last week with a potential client who had discovered her Carlsbad public-relations firm, Bailey-Gardiner, through LinkedIn. That site is commonly used as a networking tool during or in anticipation of a job search.

Facebook appears to be more popular for businesses that rely on frequent customers, particularly those that make or serve food.

Nathan Venzara, who manages Naked Cafe in Carlsbad, said the cafe has tried to weave itself into the surrounding community. That mission coincides with the methods available through Facebook, he said.

"It seemed to me that this was the online version of word-of-mouth advertising," Venzara said.

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