WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT
Social Networking

BY MEAGAN DORSCH AND PAM GREENBERG

Blogging. Tweeting. Facebooking. If you think these are terms only teenagers are familiar with, think again.

The use of social media sites, or tools of Web 2.0, spans generations. The first social networking site, SixDegrees.com, was created in 1997, followed by sites such as BlackPlanet, Friendster and MySpace. But today, the most popular site is Facebook, with more than 200 million members worldwide.

In the United States, the number of adults with a profile on a social networking site has more than quadrupled in the past four years—from 8 percent in 2005 to 35 percent in December 2008—according to Pew Internet and American Life Project surveys. Time spent on social networking and blogging sites is growing at more than three times the rate of overall global Internet growth. And the fastest growing segment of users is women over age 55.

Candidates for school boards, city councils, state legislatures and even the president of the United States have used social networking tools.

More than 35 state legislative caucuses across the country are using social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. These new interactive communities allow politicians to have direct, unfiltered communication with voters and constituents. Legislators are also using social media as a

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campaign tool that can influence debate, help build name recognition, gain supporters and motivate volunteers around elections.

Are social media for you? Below are eight things you should know before setting up your own site. These tips can help you successfully manage your site daily.

KNOW THE TOOLS

The number and types of tools in the social media arsenal are expanding each day. Remember when the term blogger was new? Knowing that the largest age demographic on Facebook

currently is 18 to 24, and 35 to 49 on Twitter, may help you decide which tools to use.

Also keep in mind which tools are considered public and which ones can be picked up by search engines. On Twitter, postings are usually visible to anyone who wants to view them, although "followers" can post replies and are more likely to view updates. Texas Senator Dan Patrick's Twitter account includes frequent updates about what's happening on the floor, opinions on bills, notes about rallies or events, and references directing readers to his Facebook page for more details. Patrick's followers post thank yous, opinions on bills and a few jabs, as well. In contrast, Facebook and other social networking sites are for members only, and interactions are between only friends.

2 FOCUS ON YOUR PURPOSE

Knowing your purpose will help determine which tools you select and how you use them. Maryland House of Delegates Minority Leader Chris Shank looks at social media as new ways to communicate with constituents and to reach out to new groups and a younger demographic, as well as to keep people connected to what is going on at the statehouse. "Facebook is a powerful medium to help my constituents," says Shank.

DELEGATE

CHRIS SHANK

MARYLAND

Representative Marko Liias of Washington announces events and invites his supporters to campaign parties, victory celebrations and community events using Facebook's events feature, which allows his supporters to register an online RSVP. He posts his opinions on his Facebook page where his supporters can give a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down."

3 DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

Do you want people to get to know you as a public official or as a private person? If you set up your sites as "Representative Smith," rather than "Joe Smith," consider the 80/20 rule. That's the advice from Brad Blake, social media director for Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. It means 80 percent of the content should be work-related, and only 20 percent personal.

On Facebook, a "Politicians" page allows people to connect with you as "supporters" rather than "friends." It also has a "Government Official" designation for those who want to keep their official duties separate from their political activities.

4 DEVELOP A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Can you integrate social media into your communications plan? Many communications offices have explored this avenue as a way to keep the public informed about activity in the legislature. Media coverage of statehouses has dwindled over the past several years, as blogs and other new media have exploded. Using social media tools can help close that gap in coverage.

Arkansas Representative Steve Harrelson believes there are three compelling arguments for using these tools: They are immediate, unfiltered and transparent. Social media, he says, give you a way to get messages out quickly, and as events occur, to say what you want without worrying how it will be filtered or interpreted.

If you decide to set up a Twitter or Face-

applications allow you to post to Twitter and Facebook simultaneously.

7
KNOW THE SECURITY RISKS

Social networking sites create a perfect opportunity for hackers and online fraudsters, according to security experts. Some schemes trick users into believing they are receiving messages from friends, and lead them to click on links to fraudulent sites that can collect passwords or personal information or download malware and viruses to users' computers. Up-to-date antivirus software and caution when opening attachments and following links in emails are essential. Social networking sites also often have security pages with updates about current threats or pages where users can report scams or possible viruses.

8
BE FAMILIAR WITH YOUR LAWS AND POLICIES

Privacy policies and terms of service agreements of social networking sites can vary considerably. In addition to understanding the policies before using the sites yourself, consider including a disclaimer on your own website if you provide links to social networking sites.

Elected officials also need to be careful about how they deal with comments that others post on their sites. Wes Sullenger, writing about legislators' blogs in the *Richmond Journal of Law and Technology,* cautions that legislators using government-owned equipment or networks are government agents and, as such, cannot censor citizen comments.

Freedom of information laws also can come into play on social networking sites. Legislators who discuss public business could find they are subject to public meetings and records laws.

The rewards involved in using social media could balance out the potential risks. At no other time in history have we been able to use technology to connect with so many people at one time. If you are thinking of diving into social media, now is a great time! Everyone is learning how to swim at the same time, and the social networking world is forgiving. Test the waters and find out if social networking is for you.

book account, remember to let people know. You can include "widgets" or little icons for many of these social media sites on your own webpage. You also can add tag lines in emails or send out a press release.

5
IDENTIFY YOUR AUDIENCE

If a large percentage of your constituents are online or are younger people, the likelihood is high that they have a social media account.

Research indicates that those plugged into this new media are more likely to volunteer, donate, promote candidates and join causes through online and word-of-mouth advocacy. And they send and receive more political text messages than the general population.

One of the biggest mistakes politicians make, according to some experts, is not paying attention to who is coming to their sites. They recommend keeping track of who signs up for updates and who is coming to events listed on your sites. They also suggest connecting with the leading online political voices—the new media gurus—in your community.

6
SET YOUR LIMITS

As of today, social networking sites are free and generally easy to sign up for and use, but keeping up with and integrating the sites into a comprehensive communications plan can be more difficult. The social networking culture is all about real time contact and regular, if not frequent, updates. According to the Internet marketing blog Hubspot, the average number of "tweets," or messages, per day is around four. If you are unable or unlikely to keep your Twitter, Facebook or MySpace accounts updated regularly, you may be better off without them. But there are tools that can make keeping up easier. For example, TweetDeck, Seesmic and other