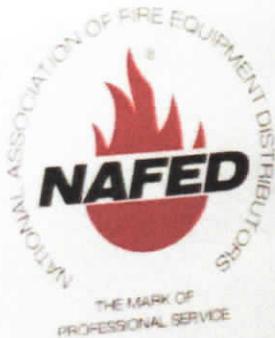


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Using Social Networking for
Business Success

Four Steps to Building a Better
Relationship with Your AHJ

The Future of the Independently Owned
Fire Equipment Distributor

Social Networking: How to Grow Your Influence & Business

LaPorte White Paper Series

By Bob Lilly

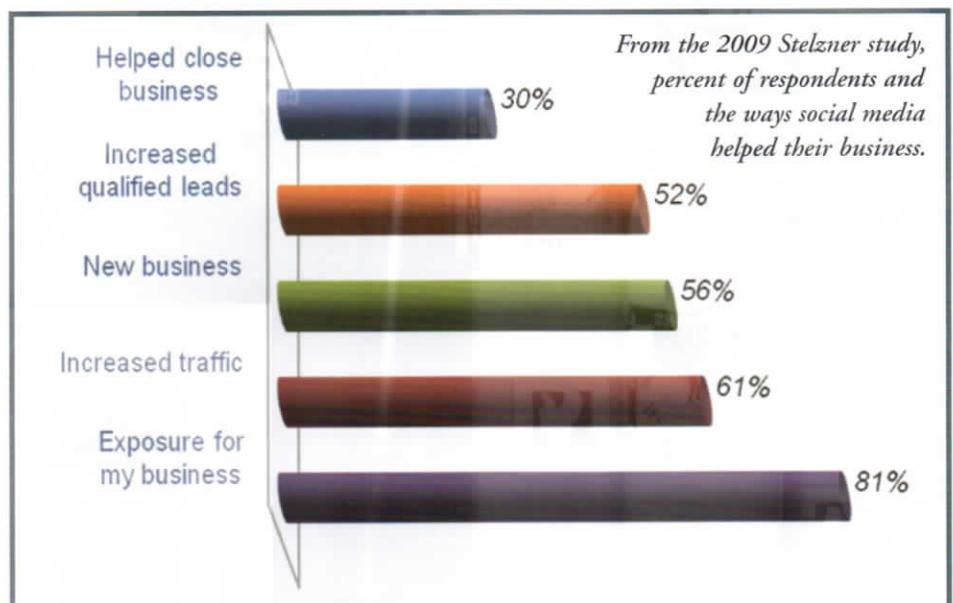
What is all the fuss about? All we hear about these days is how many followers you have on your Facebook or LinkedIn account. Has our country gone crazy with this idea of “social networking” or “social media?” Perhaps. In fact, we have not even begun to see the impact of social media in our personal lives and businesses.

What Is Social Networking?

Basic “old school” networking used to involve golf, a drink, or taking someone to a football game. One of the goals of the old-style networking was to learn about the person and communicate with them about your solutions, ideas, and skills. The goal may be the same, but the methods are new. Social networking is a term used to describe a method of communicating both for social and business objectives with millions of other people connected to the same kind of communication tool. To put it another way, social networking is an umbrella term that defines the many different kinds of activities used to integrate technology into social and business interaction, including pictures, audio, and videos.

What Are the Benefits?

A recent study in 2009 by Michael Stelzner points out some real benefits to developing a social networking strategy. The numbers of individuals and companies involved in social networking are staggering. 35 percent of Americans are on a social networking site. Here are a few of the hundreds of sites. These numbers will be out of date by the time you read this.



“People are talking about your firm in the social media community. Engage in the conversation.”

Wikipedia: 13 million articles
You Tube: 100 million videos viewed
Blogs: 200 million or more
Twitter: 14 million users in the U.S.
Facebook: 80 million users
LinkedIn: 43 million users

All of these have good applications for business, but they all may not be best for your needs and use. I am not going to try to convince you of the value, because you are already networking at some level. Technology gives you a platform to take it to another level. Research suggests that when people need to make a decision, they put more trust in person-to-person references than they do marketing or advertising.

Who Is Using Social Networking?

Let’s look at one business networking site call LinkedIn. Thirty percent of users on LinkedIn are company decision makers, with an average age of 41 and an average household income of \$109,703. Most people under 30 don’t use a phone book. They search on Google or Yahoo.

Develop a Strategy

You first need to determine a social networking strategy. Ask yourself: Why are we doing this? What is the goal? Who do we want to reach? What message do we want to get out? What are our strategies for meeting our goals?

How One NAFED Member Is Using Social Networking

Social networking has become serious business. Facebook, perhaps once seen as an Internet playland for twenty-somethings now has drawn the eye of marketers and business groups due to its astounding and growing numbers across all age groups. LinkedIn has become a stalwart of networking professionals, and Twitter has PR firms all atwitter. A large online audience is easily within reach, but how can you use social networking platforms for your business? And, more importantly, as a fire equipment distributor, why should you even bother?

NAFED member Academy Fire Protection has jumped head first into the social networking world, with many positive results. IT Manager Anthony Campanella oversees the company's social media efforts. "We're fairly new to it. As a company we started with LinkedIn, then we created a company page on Facebook, then a Twitter profile. We've linked up Twitter to Facebook, and we've been using it primarily for job postings right now."

Campanella says that Twitter is great for its search functionality. For example, a user could type in "fire extinguisher technician" and see what pops up. Facebook and LinkedIn largely require a user to be linked in some way to other users in order to see their information.

On the other hand, Academy Fire has found LinkedIn to be best for its job posting functionality. Individual profiles on LinkedIn act as virtual resumes, with the bonus of being able to view connections and referrals—all things a potential employer would want to know. For these reasons, Campanella says that LinkedIn has its advantages. "When you post a job, you get more exposure. The users on LinkedIn are more likely to be serious."

By working across multiple platforms, the company can use the strengths of each to drive users where they want them to go. A "tweet" on Twitter could lead individuals to express their interest in a job posting via LinkedIn, or could get potential clients to look up the company website to find out more. For current clients, a Facebook update could announce a new product line, for instance. "I think it's a great tool for us to basically get information out there. It's easier than constantly updating the website," says Campanella.

So to get your own company started, here are some take-away ideas for forming your own social media strategy:

1. Find (or hire) an employee with tech-savvy and some extra time who can become your go-to person for everything social media. It will be essential for this person to have ideas and enthusiasm to make your social media efforts really take off.
2. A presence on all these websites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter) can help you take advantage of the different strengths of each platform and the interconnectivity capabilities between them.
3. Find resources on social media for business use—more are popping up every day! Campanella cites Mashable (www.mashable.com) as a very useful resource. It features how-to guides and many business topics.
4. Make it dynamic. Social websites are a great place to share photos or other online media you may already have elsewhere. Campanella says Academy Fire has posted videos on Facebook and gotten positive feedback as a result.

— Tamara Matthews

Communication consultant Rick Gilman tells us to make sure that our social networking strategy is consistent with our marketing plan. Social networking should be part of, not separate, from your overall marketing.

Here are some additional questions you need to ask yourself:

1. Is the rest of the business ready for this tool?
2. Which products or services can be promoted?
3. What are the internal costs?
4. What area of sales are we hoping to influence?
5. Are our clients and prospects ready?
6. How will we measure results?

Once you have some answers to the questions above, you will be better able to move into the application that best fits your needs. Most of the sites have industry focus groups or subject-specific groups as well. Most of the sites will allow you to post an opinion or provide information. The more you post, the easier it will be for people to find you. Before you begin, you will need to assign someone the responsibility of managing the social media program. You must daily manage your program and engage in the social networking community.

What Are the Pros and Cons of Social Networking?

Pros

- Inexpensive exposure
- Good advertising
- Fast method of distributing information
- Great way to keep in touch with clients

- Utilizes a high growth industry
- Allows users to respond in real time
- Allows for (good) client feedback
- Allows you to engage in the conversation
- Communicates opinions and solutions quickly

Cons

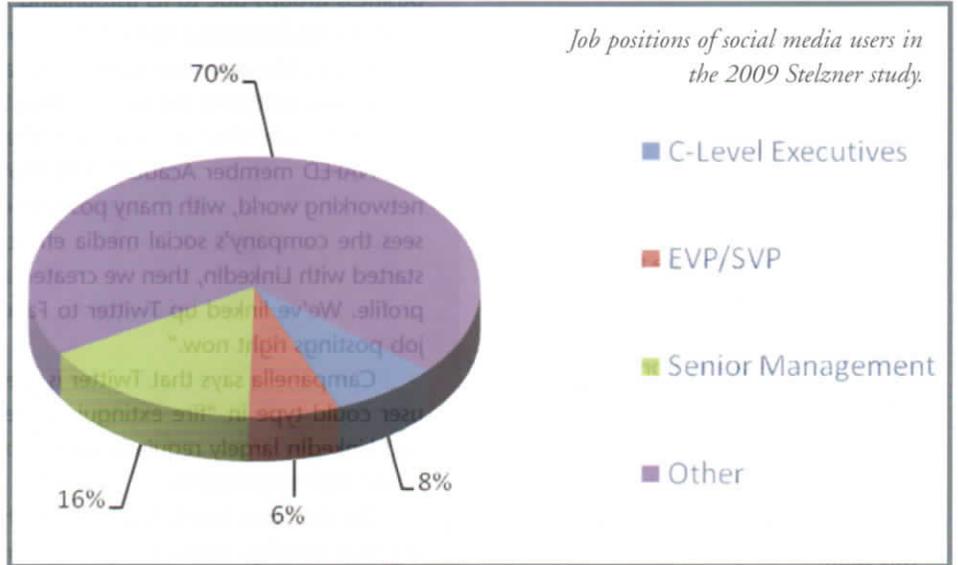
- Can be time consuming
- May generate privacy issues and concerns
- May invite identity theft
- Allows for (bad) client feedback

How to Build an Audience and Influence Others

Michael Jones, president of Userplace in Los Angeles, gives us very good information about how to get started. "The key to using a business network successfully involves the creation of your personal friends—or business connections—group. The registration process is similar across the various social networking websites, but LinkedIn boasts one of the simplest methods of inviting and maintaining your social network. By simply uploading an exported file from your contact manager, LinkedIn can immediately tell which friends of yours are members of the service. This method of contact maintenance and connection group development makes LinkedIn a breeze to start with, immediately enabling you to gain access to your contacts without having to laboriously enter emails to discover if associates are already there."

Here are some other things you can do to get started:

- Complete your profiles on the sites you select
- Upload your contact information
- Provide meaningful content
- Create compelling, keyword-rich content



- Write short papers on key issues
- Provide product launch announcements
- Introduce new solutions or services
- Don't post confidential information
- Create conversations about your products or solutions
- Manage the social media program, don't just let it go

Another way to get started is to just get set up in one program and use it for a period of time. Just remember, people are talking about your industry or even your company. A good way to find this out is to go to Google and type in your company's name with the words "sucks" or "poor service." Try doing the same for your competitors; you may be surprised.

Social networking truly is the new way to market and create an extraordinary number of relationships. With print media on the decline and the number of web-based networks growing, this is one medium that is demanding attention as it grows. Remember, you want to develop a strategy based on your mission. Daily management of your program will ensure that you grow your influence and business. ♦

Job positions of social media users in the 2009 Stelzner study.

- C-Level Executives
- EVP/SVP
- Senior Management
- Other

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