

SOCIAL NETWORKING

NOT JUST FOR CONNECTING OLD FRIENDS

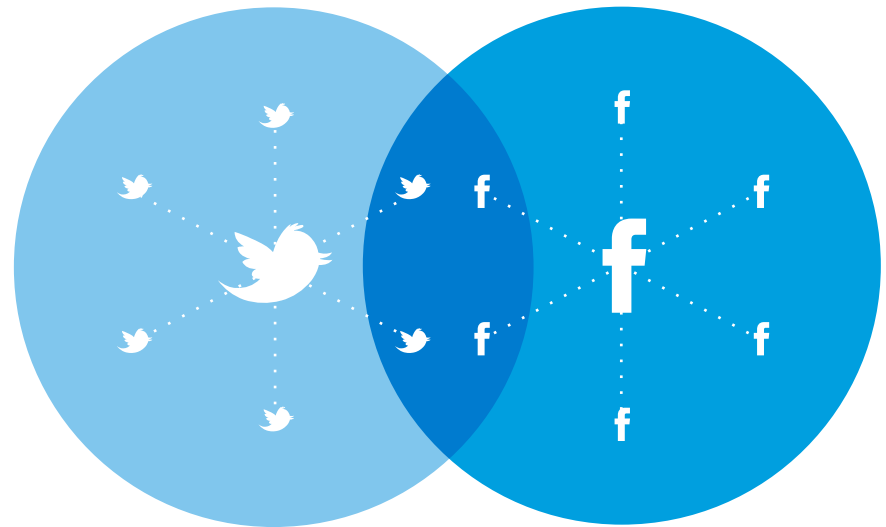
By Margo Pierce

CYBER COMMUNITIES CREATE a unique opportunity for developing and expanding diversity initiatives for one simple reason—the Internet doesn't discriminate. People from any walk of life and from virtually every age group across the globe can be found online and utilizing multiple social networking accounts. The ways that companies are leveraging this tool as a means to reach their customers, both internal and external, illustrate the myriad possibilities.

Social networking statistics alone provide a solid argument for the potential reach of various forums. Facebook reports “more than 750 million active users,” LinkedIn claims over 100 million members with 56 percent of those residing outside the United States and YouTube is “localized in 25 countries” and is available in 43 languages. Add the fact that demographic data about users are broken out by age, gender, ethnicity and so many other variables and it's easy to pinpoint the best outlet for reaching a specific audience.

Savvy businesses are investing time and money into social networking because it helps drive results for diversity activities. Employee recruitment and retention, internal communications, customer satisfaction and sales outreach are just a few of these activities taking place in this rapidly growing arena.

“Studies show that U.S. Hispanics are Internet trend setters, consuming and adopting media and technology at a higher rate than the general population,” said Jason Longoria, Senior



Marketing Manager for Diverse Markets at AT&T. “U.S. Hispanics are heavy...mobile users and most of them like to communicate online and access the Internet from their mobile devices. That's how the idea to create a Spanish-speaking social media platform was born.”

One of many social networking sites for AT&T, Facebook is an example of how the company maintains contact with their telecommunications customers and potential customers via a culturally sensitive Internet presence.

“The AT&T Latino page on Facebook was also designed to connect with AT&T's Spanish-speaking customers and complement already-existing English AT&T Facebook fan pages,” Longoria said. “For example, we know that Latinos have an affinity for sports, fashion and entertainment, so we take into account those areas of interest and develop programs that are important and relevant to them.”

An internal body within AT&T

called the Digital Leadership Council oversees social networking efforts to ensure consistency of communication and assists with addressing issues of diversity across all social networking efforts. In addition to special training in this form of outreach, the employees who are responsible for the Spanish-language sites have been recruited from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries such as Venezuela, Spain, Chile and Mexico.

“As far as the content that we develop and post, we do understand that our fans come from all over the world, including several countries in Central and Latin America,” Longoria said. “Therefore, cultural sensitivity does play a role in what our community managers post and the way they handle inquiries. Our community managers are bilingual and bi-cultural.”

When a corporation has a global reach, employees can be located in multiple countries. Having a web presence that is centered on the culture

Businesses plan to increase their budgets for social recruiting by

55%

and social norms of the home country of the corporation could cause some unintended problems. This can be especially true when recruiting new employees, according to Michael Tresca, Recruiting Communications Manager for GE Aviation.

He appreciates the ability to reach local candidates for local employment opportunities through social networking sites because it helps him find the best person for the job.

“GE’s primary focus is on global engagement,” Tresca said. “We do a great job in the United States in reaching candidates through our campus and job postings, but sometimes have difficulty reaching candidates in other parts of the world. Social media allows us to focus on these growth opportunities, including Africa, Brazil, India and China.”

The GE Facebook page in particular includes information about the company locally and provides a larger corporate context for other facilities. Recruiters will answer general questions on the site, but use the posts as an opportunity to communicate one-on-one with individuals via e-mail. After a candidate learns about the job and the company, he or she can apply online, streamlining the search process for everyone involved.

However, GE takes this online presence to another level when it

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comes to connecting with candidates via its blog. A specific recruiter page offers tips for job hunters while the main “careers” page offers videos, interviews and posts from a diverse group of employees from GE locations all over the world.

This combination approach of utilizing multiple social networking resources is more complicated when it comes to managing a company’s Internet presence. It requires a significant commitment to planning and possibly includes a large number of people, but it can be done, as Sodexo proves.

As a provider of food and facilities management services across North America, Sodexo serves and employs a diverse population of people.

“The main purpose of these social media sites is to engage and share content,” said Michael McManus, the company’s Director of Public Relations. “A large part of our diversity communication efforts take place on social media. We have a Facebook page dedicated to diversity and inclusion, which is open to everyone.”

He explained that a significant part of the “target audience” is internal staff. Promoting and facilitating internal communications is a less obvious but critical role that social networking can play in diversity efforts. Multiple private Facebook group pages are created by the company to cultivate open communication, and McManus recommends the practice to other businesses.

“We have an incredible group of people working for Sodexo who bring unique and diverse culture,

backgrounds and expertise to the company. How better to celebrate the employee and their respective backgrounds than to provide a space to share their unique experiences?” he said. “Utilize Facebook group pages and create a space where your internal communities can thrive and where those connections and conversations between employees can take place.”

Additionally, the company uses Flickr to post pictures from internal events and celebrate the philanthropic efforts of employees, Twitter to connect with potential candidates and the Sodexo blog addresses a range of topics including posts about the Student Board of Directors and other diversity initiatives.

As these companies prove, social networking isn’t just for connecting

1 billion tweets post every 5 days

with old high school friends any more. It’s a global communications tool for expanding the reach of those willing to make the effort to engage. **PDJ**

Margo Pierce is a freelance writer based in Cincinnati, Ohio with more than 15 years of experience in the field of communications. A 2009 Fellow of The Peter Jennings Project for Journalists and the Constitution, Margo has also won several journalism awards from the Society of Professional Journalists and the North American Street Newspaper Association.