

## Demystifying Social Media, Part One

What is it, and what makes sense for the AEC profession?



BY ANNE SCARLETT

Anne Scarlett is president of Scarlett Consulting ([www.annescarlett.com](http://www.annescarlett.com)) in Chicago. She can be reached at [anne@annescarlett.com](mailto:anne@annescarlett.com) or 773-251-8132. Sign up for Scarlett Letter blog via RSS feed: [www.annescarlett.com/feed](http://www.annescarlett.com/feed). Follow Anne on Twitter: [twitter.com/annescarlett](http://twitter.com/annescarlett).

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**WHEN IT COMES TO TECHNOLOGY**, the architectural/engineering/construction industry often seems to trail behind. We tentatively (even skeptically) watch as other professionals in similar industries delve into social media, hoping to learn vicariously from their lessons. Yet despite our slow start, the AEC industry has finally begun to increase its social media presence.

Based on a survey funded by the SMPS Foundation and published on [enr.com](http://enr.com), the white paper “Social Networking for Competitive Advantage” reports AEC’s biggest hesitancy to jump into social media is a lack of understanding of what it is, how it works, and how to measure results. Confusion case in point: survey respondents did not consistently distinguish between two very different forms of networking: electronic social networking as opposed to conferences and other offline networking events. According to the study, the AEC firms that do use blogs, LinkedIn ([linkedin.com](http://linkedin.com)), Facebook ([facebook.com](http://facebook.com)) and Twitter ([twitter.com](http://twitter.com)) use them for specific purposes: marketing individual professionals (62%), marketing the firm (50%) and, to a lesser degree, for employee recruitment (20%) and retention (7%).

The buzz about social media and how much it will honestly help companies to grow their businesses can be mind-boggling at best, downright frustrating at worst!

I know those of you AEC professionals who are introverts (like me) may feel a little shy about connecting, exposing, and building relationships online. But what you’ll discover is that social media participants are enthusiastic about trading ideas, discussing, and giving/getting feedback. Further, the entire premise is around engaging with people, so they will welcome you with open arms. It is said that social media channels increase one’s direct access to individuals who might otherwise be highly

inaccessible. Believe it or not, one might have better luck “touching” a C-level person or a key decision maker through social media as compared to calling or trying to meet in person. It’s all in the name—social media is truly social!

So, before you throw up your hands and close the door on social media for your firm or for yourself—and before you say that you are too experienced (don’t need it), too busy, or too old—please reconsider. Reconsider for the sake of your professional and personal success. And reconsider for the sake of your future.

It may help you to see an AEC firm that’s doing it well. The best example I’ve seen thus far is HOK ([www.hok.com](http://www.hok.com)), a global architectural/engineering/planning firm headquartered in St. Louis. Not only do they have a head start, but they actually have a strong foothold in social media. HOK is consistently active and visible in LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Delicious and VisualCV, along with 30 active in-house bloggers publishing from across the globe.

You may agree that your firm needs to get involved (or formalize and increase its involvement) in social media. But perhaps you’re not sure about how it makes sense for you personally to be socially active, either on behalf of your firm or as an individual. Here are some initial thoughts to consider:

**Owners and leaders:** Do you recall in the late 1990s when some AEC firms took forever to launch a website? Today, the notion of having no website is unthinkable for a business-to-business professional services firm. (We won’t even talk about the problem of having a non-functioning, non-user-friendly, non-interactive website.)

Social media has been around for several years now. It’s reached the mainstream and has proved itself to be an excellent form of marketing and business development. There is still a

lot to learn for all of us, but why be on the tail end of this? There is still time to get active relatively early compared to your industry competitors. And remember, even if your firm's target markets are not yet highly active in social media, they will be. Wouldn't it be better for them to see that you already have it together when they finally start dabbling in it themselves?

As a firm owner, you really want to make sure that your firm establishes both a *social media program* and a *social media policy*. The *social media program* will involve some level of consistent, active involvement. Perhaps key staff—studio heads, marketing, discipline directors, etc.—are formally assigned to participate in online “conversations” on a regular basis. You also could select in-house ghostwriters to interview technical leaders for their insight and expertise, and then craft the content into an articulate, reader-friendly piece. The bottom line is for the online audience to view your firm as an authority, an expert, a leader—just like how we attempt to position our firms within all other marketing, promotional, and proposal materials.

Your *social media policy* will state the firm's expectations on what is and is not shared about your firm by staff members; branding language and issues; specific social media venues that are “approved” to be used on company time for company benefit, etc. The policy can be tricky, because the beauty of social media revolves around transparency and helping others. Nonetheless, you need to view this professionally, and prepare a serious policy in advance of something going awry in cyberspace.

**Mid-level professionals:** If you are looking to grow your career, you want to solidify a personal brand for yourself...right now. Do an online vanity search (search for your own name) and see your personal brand on top pages in the search. Further, your online image needs to reflect the image that you want to reflect for years to come. Take special care to carve out your place, and

know that this is a way in which you can exponentially create your brand, solidify your reputation, increase your network, and position yourself as a talented industry player.

**Entry-level professionals:** *You* are the group with the most savvy and comfort in social media! Step up to the plate and help your leadership to create solid brands for themselves and for the firm as a whole. Study up on this stuff and offer to host an in-house lunch-and-learn (or even a series) to walk them through the basics using a projector and hands-on learning (with each in front of their own laptop). Take it to the next level and work with them individually to be their ghost-blogger or blog co-author, if they need it.

Another area where you could assist the firm is through community outreach and involvement. There is a plethora of ways that social media creates social good/change. (Google it; you'll see what I mean). You have the means to increase your own value as far more than “just a technical person” if you help. As I've said in many prior articles, technical people who actively partake in the firm's marketing/business development effort will ultimately elevate their careers to new heights.

### Getting started.

Please do these things as a start:

1. **Join LinkedIn** (but don't just join!) Make it a goal to do searches to link with any and all relevant colleagues in your industry.
2. **Locate at least five relevant blogs** written by your clients, prospects, industry experts, or competitors. Bookmark and subscribe to their RSS feeds. Need an example? Try [www.annescarlett.com/feed](http://www.annescarlett.com/feed). Technorati is a reliable source for blog searches.
3. **Sign up for a free RSS reader** (I use Google reader). Set it up so that you are not just receiving blog subscriptions, but you are also receiving Google alerts on subjects of interest. Review these feeds dai-

ly, just like you would review the news. And when possible, switch over your newsletter subscriptions to RSS feeds to get you in the habit of using the tool.

4. **Set up a Twitter account** (but don't just set it up!) Use a tool like Tweetdeck to create at least eight relevant searches that you can watch and evaluate for a couple of weeks as a quiet listener. In addition to client and competitor names, make sure you also create hashtag searches (#construction, for example).

5. **Sign up** for AISC's new file sharing and social networking site\*: [www.steeltools.org](http://www.steeltools.org).

Remember, the unknown is intimidating for all of us until we actually become familiar and versed. Whenever we learn anything new—whether it's structural engineering, a new language, or a new computer language—the foreign aspect is scary. Yet, think about how, as you slowly but surely become more versed, it suddenly starts to become recognizable, interesting, and dare I say... exciting?

Part Two of this article will address more tactical steps, resources and opportunities for you and your firm to get involved in social media. MSC

*\* AISC is launching a new file sharing and social networking site on SteelDay, September 18, at [www.steeltools.org](http://www.steeltools.org). The site will be open to all interested parties and will give individuals the ability to share files, contribute to web forums and discussions, and set up custom user profiles.*