



Firms Experiment With Social Media Before Jumping In

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By [Melissa Traynor](#)

Hoping to quickly stake out digital territory, some construction industry firms are trying out the newest social media tools. After the initial rush of enthusiasm, they soon realize signing up for everything all at once may not exactly pay off. Eventually they were able to glean from their early experiences a thoughtful approach to these rapidly populating applications.



Photo: HOK

HOK brought bloggers from its international offices to its St. Louis headquarters for hands-on training.

Todd Andrlik, vice president of marketing and public relations at Leopardo Companies, Hoffman Estates, Ill., says industry firms should consider why social media works, what tools to use and how to use them effectively.

Using social media depends on the intent and the target audience. With more than 200 million active users on Facebook and estimates of between 3 million and 6 million active users on Twitter, there is potential for wide reach on the channels these users prefer. "You have to fish where the fish are," Andrlik says.

He says Leopardo, ranked 223 on the ENR Top 400 Contractors list, has had a positive experience with LinkedIn because Leopardo sought to connect itself to others in the construction industry.

Vik Duggal, who transitioned from a job at Johnson Controls in Seattle to founding an online magazine called Konstructr.com, believes that for social media to be successful, companies have to approach it with a plan in mind. The construction industry, he reasons, is based on relationships both in person and on the Web. "Business can come from anywhere," he adds.

He stresses that firms need to be active online, strengthen networking ties and remaining in the conversation. "I'm out there," Duggal says of his online self-promotion. "If you just sit on the sidelines and don't do anything, you're not going to get anything out of it."

St. Louis-based architect-engineer HOK Inc. is using social-media campaigns to reach out to its own employees and beyond. When HOK began experimenting with YouTube, it knew it needed a presence online but didn't

know exactly why. Michael Plotnick, manager of corporate communications, says its blog, called Life at HOK, sprouted from the firm's initial social-media efforts. It is written by 25 voices within the firm who discuss work and life at the company as well as thoughts and news about projects. Plotnick sees it as a way to make the firm more accessible. "It's about letting the process show before it has been airbrushed, Photoshopped and color-corrected," Plotnick says. HOK uses a Facebook group, with 600 members, to recruit young mid-level employees.

New Faces

Alexandra Spencer, communications chair for the Los Angeles, Calif., chapter of Women's Transportation Seminar, says her chapter hosts a group on Facebook made up of young professionals and students. WTSLA uses the page to spread scholarship news and to reach out to potential members. Spencer also tweets regularly for WTS about a mix of general interest information and industry news.

For rental company RSC Equipment in Scottsdale, Ariz., Twitter is still an experiment. They've been tweeting since February and are planning a Facebook page to promote internal communications among the company's 4,600 employees. It's also about brand awareness, promoting RSC's online magazine, Making Tracks, learning about the industry and providing digestible information about the company to the masses.

"We're not in an industry that would really jump at these social-media opportunities," says RSC spokeswoman Heather Schlichting. "This economy is making us do things we've never done before, and I don't think that's a bad thing."

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