



Using Blogosphere and message boards in a social media plan

January 25, 2010 - Front Section

After four columns focused on social media theory - education, listening, protocol and engagement - it is time to focus on the practical application of these ideas for commercial real estate (CRE) professionals. During the next several months, I will introduce you to the universe of social media tools available to help you communicate with stakeholders, build support for your development project, generate leads and expand marketing opportunities. In this column we will cover blogs and message boards.

A blog (abbreviation for web log) is simply a website hosted by an individual or group that features regular posts about a topic of interest listed in reverse chronological order. Bloggers can be ordinary citizens, specialists in a field, public officials and, increasingly, journalists affiliated with traditional media outlets. A key component of all blogs is the ability for visitors to comment on the author's posts, and begin a dialogue not just with the blogger but with his or her followers as well.

The "blogosphere" is currently comprised of more than 112.8 million unique blogs according to Technorati.com, the leading search engine for blogs. Technorati is an excellent resource for every phase of social media planning. You can use it to educate yourself about the blogging community and protocol for participation; to listen to relevant conversations occurring in the blogosphere; and to identify opportunities for engagement either by participating in individual blogs or by starting one of your own.

A message board is similar to a blog in that it provides members a forum to discuss specific topics of interest. The key difference is that a single blogger or information source is not directing the content of the conversation. While a moderator oversees activity on the message board to enforce a set of predetermined rules, all content and comments are created and posted by participants of the community. At Schneider Associates, we regularly use Town Meeting Member Association (TMMA) message boards to help our clients' secure town meeting approval for their development projects (I will explain this later in more detail).

If creating a blog or message board is a core component of your social media plan, there are a variety of inexpensive, easy-to-use online applications to help you get started. For blogs, I recommend Blogspot.com or Wordpress.com because they are well tested, popular and free of charge. For message boards, it is important for you to moderate the conversation. We recommend incorporating a message board as part of a larger informational micro-site, so you can educate visitors in the same place that you are engaging them in discussion. While there is no cookie cutter approach to starting a blog or building a message board following, we offer our clients the following simple tips for starting out:

- * Create an editorial calendar of posting or discussion topics that highlights important events for your project or business. An editorial calendar for your blog will help ensure that you are covering key

issues and engaging regularly.

- * Make sure someone is in charge of updating content and engaging your community. Be realistic about whether this is a responsibility that you can manage, or whether you should assign it to someone else.

- * Post and update content regularly, and encourage discussion by responding to comments.

My commercial real estate clients fall into two distinct camps when it comes to their blogging and messaging habits. Some seek to proactively participate in the blogosphere by engaging in regular online conversations or creating new sites of their own. Others benefit more from a reactive approach to social media by using these online tools to gather invaluable information to support their end goals.

Proactive users generally have a project or service to sell. These users often include real estate brokerage and advisory firms, developers marketing new projects or facilities managers. It makes sense for our proactive CRE clients to broadcast their products, opportunities and talents to as wide an audience as possible, and blogs and message boards are an excellent way to accomplish that goal. Here are some ways this can work:

- * Become an industry thought leader and attract new clients by creating a blog that offers timely, relevant and insightful content;
- * Appear higher on Google search results by incorporating search engine optimized keywords into new blog posts and online content;
- * Whenever possible, leverage all of your web and social media platforms to create additional linkage, which supports stronger search engine optimization (SEO);
- * Get extra mileage out of traditional press hits and marketing opportunities and reach new and larger audiences by reposting content on blogs and message boards;
- * Provide better customer service to potential and existing clients by providing an additional outlet for direct communications;
- * Post video tours of available space.

Our commercial real estate clients using social media for reactive purposes often have a project in need of town meeting approval, or seek to use social media to research new business opportunities. Here are some ways this approach works:

- * Determine recurring questions and concerns of Town Meeting members by tracking the local TMMA message board and blogs of key civic leaders;
- * Respond by posting comments or messages that provide helpful information, clarification or an opportunity for additional dialogue;
- * Identify likely project supporters and opponents based on the content of their blog and message board posts;
- * Learn about development challenges in a particular community by reading about past projects.

Now you are ready to explore the blogosphere and message boards, and engage with participants! In my next column, I will discuss microblogging (Twitter) and how it can support your social media plan. In the meantime, I encourage you to join the conversation with us on our blog (www.schneiderpr.com/blog/) or Twitter (@schneiderpr).

Philip Pennellatore is executive vice president/partner at Schneider Associates, Boston, Mass.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540