



# WALKING THE LINE IN THE WILD WEST OF SOCIAL MEDIA

By Judi Connor

There are now 75 million Twitterers, 350 million active Facebook users, and 133 million blogs indexed by Technorati (an Internet blog search engine). Whether you're an old-school Luddite or an early adopter, you know your clients are online; tweeting, texting and friending. One of the nice things about social media networking is that it's more relaxed; it's okay to express your personality. But there's a fine line between showing your individualism and letting it all hang out, especially when it comes to your real estate business.

Social media is sort of the wild west of marketing; no rigid rules and no social media sheriff rounding up outlaws. However, the same kind of etiquette, ethics and business common sense that apply in any other marketing or sales effort should be followed with social media. REALTORS® who are new to the arena or are not finding success with their current efforts should make sure they have a basic understanding of social media and try to strike a healthy balance of personal and professional in online conversations.

## Strategize, Start Slowly and Listen First

The most important first step in social media is planning and understanding your goals. Becky Boomsma, a REALTOR® with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Franklin Lakes, N.J., participates on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. "All my efforts are focused on branding," Boomsma says. "I'm not necessarily looking for clients or referrals – it's more just to let people know what I do and give them a little insight and intrigue to learn more about me."

Boomsma expects different benefits from each of her social media sites. She uses Facebook to connect with other people in the industry and the payback is in business connections. With Twitter, she often learns what topics are of interest to people by posing questions, raising issues or posting links. LinkedIn helps her stay in touch with past clients and serves as a great referral tool.

Besides blogging and the "big three" of Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, there are many other social media venues, including YouTube, Flickr, and Digg. It can seem overwhelming if you're just wading into the social media stream now.

Deborah Madey, social media veteran and a broker of Peninsula Realty Group in Shrewsbury, N.J., says, "My suggestion is to do a quick review of the basics and start off with just a Facebook or LinkedIn account."



You need to get a feel for what's going on in that community. Listen to what other people are saying and then join their conversations."

In his popular book, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, David Meerman Scott says profile photos in social media sites are important for branding, since they pop up every time you post. He advises using a close-up shot of yourself (not a pet or an avatar) that conveys the impression you want to give. So maybe nix that shot of you on vacation sipping a giant margarita.

### Adding Value and Building Trust

"People who put their listings on Facebook drive me crazy," says Bill Lublin, CEO of Century 21 Advantage Gold in Southampton, Pa. and founder of the Social Media Marketing Institute. "Every listing in our marketplace is reiterated a thousand times, so why put listings on your Facebook page?"

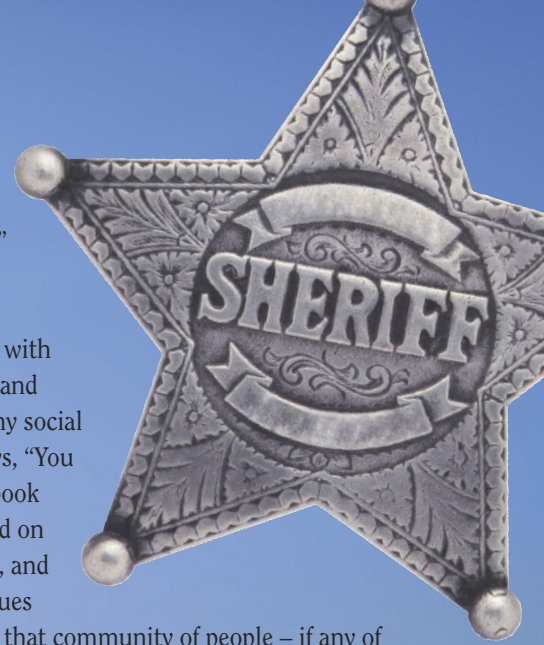
Lublin tells his students that the purpose of social media is "to become a trusted member of a community." You shouldn't pitch or hard sell in social media – that's a sure fire way of losing trust immediately. Instead, offer your online audience valuable information, something relevant to raise the interest level.

Successful social media users, in addition to posting useful, relevant content, look for ways to tie in with the local community and respond to others' posts. Boomsma says, "Some try to hard sell and only write about their business, rather than what's going on around them, information that people might find very interesting. They overlook being a conduit for the community."

Larry Mraz, a REALTOR-ASSOCIATE® with Prudential New Jersey Properties in Metuchen, N.J., maintains a blog and is active on Facebook and LinkedIn. He says his most useful blog posts have been problem resolution issues such as underground storage tanks, tax credit deadlines, how to prepare a home for sale, etc. "If I'm with a client and they ask me a question, I'm always considering whether it

would make a good blog posting."

Lublin maintains several blogs, each with unique audiences, and participates in many social media sites. He says, "You could have a Facebook community focused on contemporary jazz, and share posts on venues and new artists. In that community of people – if any of them were looking for a home, you'd be the go-to person."



**The wild west atmosphere of social networking leaves business users wondering what looks professional and what should be kept personal.**

"It's a combination of expertise and letting your personality show through," says Madey. "You should be very candid about who you are." Madey posts regularly about local restaurants, as she dines out frequently. Some of her clients, familiar with her online writing, ask about restaurants while she's driving them to see a house. But while there's personal information that might be appropriate for your particular audience, there are other things better kept offline.

### What Would Mom (or Your Client) Think?

"The online world is a public venue," Lublin says. "Anything you wouldn't tell your mom or dad — don't say it online. Whatever it is you're saying, to whoever you think you're talking to, the audience is actually much larger." Many REALTORS® have sites that include colleagues, friends, local businesses and clients. Judy Moriarty, a REALTOR® with N.T. Callaway Real Estate, LLC in Pennington, N.J., says, "We befriend our clients on Facebook sometimes and then forget that they're there because we have hundreds of friends."

Moriarty tells an interesting story to illustrate her point; she saw a philosophical post on another agent's site along the lines of "how we create our own reality" and one of the agent's clients responded with a post saying essentially: that's great, but now can you realize my home into being sold? Another agent posted something about "my stupid client."

"My personal opinion is there's a very fine line between personal and business," says Moriarty. "Sure we all have personal lives, but you have to realize that while you're talking to your friends online, your clients can hear you too."

### Anger: One Letter Short of Danger

In the wild west, a cowboy could let off a little steam with a fellow rider and all would be forgotten in a few days (or years); not so with social media. With one click, a post written in the heat of anger, disappointment or strong difference of opinion is out there in cyberspace forever.

"People need to be aware of the permanence of the Internet," Lublin says. "You have to be careful about what you say. If you're really upset or angry, that's not the time to respond."

There have been some terse arguments between REALTORS® on various sites that are frankly, kind of ugly. Anyone can read these, including potential clients and employers, and it doesn't reflect a professional image. Social media networking should ultimately result in positive associations and that doesn't happen by trash-talking. If you've got a legitimate beef with someone, it's best to take it offline rather than sully the industry's reputation.

### Striking Gold

Social media networking has its rewards, although like any other marketing effort, success doesn't happen overnight. Through their consistent social media conversations, Boomsma and Madey have gained clients, made and received referrals, and created a large network of contacts. The two actually met online three years ago, and became friends. In fact, at Madey's invitation, Boomsma spoke about social media at the Monmouth County Women's Council of REALTORS®' chapter event earlier this year.

Moriarty was "discovered" on LinkedIn by a human resources professional for Santa Ana, Calif.-based Atlantic & Pacific Real Estate LLC, and just accepted a job as broker of record for their new New Jersey office. She says, "I decided to focus on my management skills on LinkedIn, and set it up like a business resume. The HR person says she finds all her candidates through LinkedIn."

### Playing Safe

While social media is a great way to network, keep in mind that like anything on the Internet, it's fair game for hackers and cyber thieves. Last year, British insurance firm Legal & General released "The Digital Criminal Report," based on a study of more than 2,000 social media users. Among its findings was that almost half claimed to have no worries about the security or privacy of social networking sites. A surprising 38 percent posted updates detailing holiday plans and 70 percent thought social media sites were great showcases for their cool new purchases.

### A few personal security tips to remember:

- Set up security preferences in your social media sites
- Don't display your personal home address
- Don't post vacation plans/ photos of expensive items
- Strengthen passwords and don't use the same password on multiple sites
- Don't access social media sites from public computers that could have spyware
- Ensure your own PC has updated virus definitions and security patches
- Don't click on links in e-mails from "friends" asking you to download a video or see pictures (check with them first)
- Monitor access to your PC ■

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