

What a load of tweets

Sam Burnett explains how ADIs can use social networking to help their businesses

Many people approach social networking sites with dread, but for the enlightened they offer the chance to keep in touch with industry developments, network with fellow instructors and find a greater sense of community in a business that can sometimes be lacking in opportunities to share information and opinions with fellow professionals

When it comes to potential new business, there are two degrees of separation on the internet, as DIA group manager Steve Garrod explains: "The best way of promoting your business is word of mouth. If you can get your pupils to talk about your business online, it's instant free advertising."

We've focused mainly on Twitter and Facebook for our quick guide to social media, but being sociable on the internet can lead you many different outlets – Wordpress blogging, LinkedIn business networking or YouTube videos. The trick is to use what suits your needs the best.

The main principles are universal. Firstly, don't take it too seriously, but be professional. This is your virtual shop window out on to the world, where everyone could be a potential customer. You want to communicate your professional values and your personality without being inappropriate.

Everyone can get it wrong – the DSA has an official twitter account for disseminating news from the agency, but also employs three members of staff who tweet daily

under their own names. These accounts have attracted some criticism for their apparent triviality, but it goes to show the careful balance between a professional and personal tone online.

Secondly, you need to be prepared to put the work in. There's nothing worse than seeing an account online where someone has posted a few entries and given up. It takes time to get going, but there are people everywhere – including the DIA – who will offer help and advice if you get stuck.

For some people, communication comes easily, but others might need to be more disciplined about putting time into the diary to update their Facebook page or blog. Twitter and Facebook have different time demands, so deciding which platform is for you is important.

Finally – do you really want to do this? It's a good way of managing your reputation as a small business, and will help you to see your business as a brand, but if you aren't sincere about getting involved in the online community it will be obvious – and it will affect your credibility.

DIAMOND chief examiner Mike Frisby says everyone should at least consider their presence online: "There are real benefits to social media if you make the time – networking and keeping up to date with industry information."

Follow our tips and get stuck in, though, and you won't go far wrong.

Getting started

The sign-up procedures are usually easy to use and will have you publishing things online in no time. You'll need a valid email address to sign up, but that's about it.

You'll need to be equipped for whichever platform you're using. For example, a Facebook business page, which affords you the opportunity to share interesting links and resources,

can be updated at home. Twitter, on the other hand, is more instant, demanding and rewarding. You could update your Twitter account using a smartphone between lessons, for instance. However, as you already know, operating a handheld device with a learner at the wheel is covered by the same legislation as that which outlaws making phone calls while in

charge of a vehicle.

Whichever you settle on (and you can always use both), make sure you take part enthusiastically and don't just promote yourself. Think of the world of social media in the same way as a dinner party, where you have to be charming and establish credibility before handing over a business card at the end of the evening.

Twitter

Twitter was started by a small group of friends in California back in 2006 and now has 380 million users worldwide. The basic premise is that users can post 'tweets' of up to 140 characters (the same as a good, old-fashioned text message and which can include links to web pages, videos on YouTube or photos uploaded from your smartphone) on to their wall, which is then visible to people who have chosen to follow them.

You are encouraged to follow people whose updates you find interesting and you can take part in conversations by directing your tweets at individual users. If you say something

interesting you're likely to get 'retweeted', where someone reposts your original tweet to their own followers.

You can use Twitter quite easily on your phone or laptop and it can be neatly integrated on to your website homepage. You can do this using applications or 'clients' (there are literally hundreds of them, but the most popular include TweetDeck, Tweetie, Twitpic and Twittrific) that can improve Twitter's functionality or make it more accessible from different devices.

Twitter is by far the best means of keeping up to date with industry news and developments and has a strong sense of community.

Facebook

Facebook was started by Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard in 2004 and has exploded across the world since then, with around 800m users currently and a value estimated at \$41bn in November 2010.

It's important here to set up a business page rather than using your personal Facebook profile to promote yourself. You want to keep some professional distance between you and your pupils. Your page is more customisable compared to Twitter –

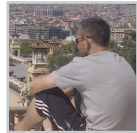
you can easily add applications and share videos, images and useful links.

The larger user base means a wider potential audience, but the specific nature of choosing to 'like' a page means it will attract a limited set of users with previous experience of your business. One of the benefits of Facebook over Twitter for personal users is that they can specifically tailor the information they see on their homepage – ideal if they choose your page.

“ This is your virtual shop window on to a world where everyone could be a potential customer

What the ADIs say

Timeline



Stewart Lochrie (@lochrie)

As a franchisee, I rely on Facebook and Twitter to make up for not running my own website. I netv ADIs all over the country and have received great advice from many of them.

I also network with locals in my area, and a few have sent business my way after seeing one of their followers asking about a reputable instructor. Build up your reputation as a professional, but also as a human being, and people will remember and point folk your way.

If you're good at your job and use Twitter properly, sharing interesting content and staying professional, the business should come automatically.



Marti Trujols (@martiv)

I used to have a web page but it wasn't financially productive so I cancelled it. I started with Twitter last September to improve business networking and get my name around.

Although no new business has come up from it yet, by following other users related to road safety, ADIs, police, etc, I find my knowledge on the subject has improved dramatically and it's so much easier to keep myself updated.

I follow users who are relevant, and tweet and retweet stuff of interest. By doing so, I've found my followers keep growing and therefore knowledge of my name is expanding.



Martin Evans (@azionamento)

I started using Twitter to promote my business – I wanted to be known as a driving 'expert' and stay in people's minds.

I only started relatively recently, but now I have 80+ followers – small in comparison to celebrities like Stephen Fry, but it's building nicely. I've made some good contacts with advanced instructors in the same line of work.

I've not gained any business as yet, but I'm building a following that will hopefully pay dividends in the future. Make sure you help others to promote their business as well. It's not all take, you do need to give for it to work.



Paul Rodgers (@freewaysom)

I started to use social media networks professionally because of how we as consumers have adapted to our ever-changing technological world.

Most websites are pretty static and don't allow for interaction or an immediate response in the same way as Twitter. Nor do they make effective use of cross-linking to other relevant news articles and discussions like with Facebook.

Be interesting, informative and amusing, but never be abusive or repetitive. A Twitter timeline filled with someone constantly plugging their ridiculously low lesson rates is one sure way to be unfollowed.



David Horgis (@horgis_driving)

I use my Facebook page to separate my personal account from my business account. When someone likes my page they are sharing this information with all of their friends, it's a bit like they are telling their friends about me as an instructor. Twitter I try to use in the same way, except I tend to use this as an ADI-to-ADI network.

Make sure people know that you're online: put it on your website, business cards etc. Ask your customers to follow you or like you. Make sure it's a Facebook page and not your personal account AND make sure your customers understand they are "liking" your business NOT you, or they might shy away.



What the experts say

We spoke to some social media experts who have built up strong followings in their own fields – via Twitter, of course – to see what tips they had.

Alex Walsh is a semi-professional parenting blogger and has built up a 1,500-strong following on Twitter. He warns that you need to know when to lock the smartphone away: "I see plenty of small business accounts go haywire when

they've had a few beers of an evening." Alex says if you want to use social media personally, it's best to set up a separate account for work.

Rhian Jones is a car journalist and web producer and has three top tips she uses whenever she does Twitter training: "Don't be scared of it. People are interested in what you have to say. And don't take it too seriously."

For the seasoned pro

If you've been using Facebook and Twitter for some time, and are fairly web-literate, there are useful analytics sites that you can use to assess the performance and efficacy of your social networking accounts.

For Twitter, looking at tweetstats.com can highlight how others are interacting with you. For example, the site shows the DIA's twitter feed has averaged 13% @-replies and 19% retweets since it was created, and our most used word is 'driving'. Good novelty value, at least. Using sites such as bit.ly to shorten URLs from websites or pages that you want to link to in your posts will also provide stats for each link and show what's successful.

Facebook pages come with Insights, where you can see statistics for individual post views and demographic breakdowns of your fans. A useful new feature here is the Reach report, which shows you a further breakdown of the friends of friends who have seen information that has appeared on your fans' walls.

When you post, are you analysing successful users' tweets and Facebook updates to see what gets them retweeted and liked? Getting to know your audience and providing them with useful information builds up your credibility and reputation. Are you finding information first, or are you able to add some unique expert commentary to things?

Klout and Peer Index assign users scores according to their social influence as determined by a mysterious set of algorithms. That said, it's not about getting high up the search rankings when someone is looking for something, but rather being at the forefront of their mind when they're thinking about something – building up good relationships is key.

Finally, have you thought about your CPD? DIA group manager Steve Garrod says using Twitter strategically is a worthwhile addition to your diary: "You can keep a simple record of the industry information you've gained and it's a free way to keep up with your CPD."



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