



## Choosing Digital Tools and Channels for your Association

*How to avoid “shiny object” syndrome*

Hilary Marsh, March 2013

### Introduction

Social media channels members may want your association to participate in:

- The “big three” (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn)
- Newer channels: Google Plus, Foursquare, Instagram, Quora, Tumblr, Alltop, Slideshare, Flickr

Tech tools members may want your association to adopt:

- mobile apps
- blogs
- videos
- responsive design
- widgets
- private online communities
- RSS feeds
- comments and ratings
- toolbars

The “Weighting Game” session at the REALTOR® Association Executives Institute in March 2013 covered five channels and tools that represent a range from the most established to the newest. Here are the statistics covered at the session, and more.

Today, 54% of members use social or professional networking sites, and 10% have a blog. Adopting any of these tools is like having a baby – the setup takes planning and thoughtfulness, but the real effort is in the care and feeding in the long term.

### Facebook

- Started out in 2004 as a website only for college students
- Opened to the public in 2006
- Currently has 163 million users from the United States, more than a billion total from around the world
- About 500 million people log in every day
- Introduced the “like” button in 2010
- Almost all REALTOR® associations have pages or groups, but many aren’t updated very often

### Pinterest

- Visual social network.
- Launched in 2011.

- Users create visual “pinboards” – kind of like scrapbooks – where they store and share all kinds of images.
- Originally, used primarily to share recipes and home and fashion ideas, but increasing numbers of business users.
- Almost 28 million users –third-most popular social network in terms of traffic, just behind Twitter!
- About 80 percent of users are women.

### **Blog**

- If you don’t feed them with new posts on a regular basis (weekly, or more), they wither and die.
- People notice and don’t respond to ghostwritten posts – usually, posts that staff members write on behalf of volunteer leaders. Even if you don’t think it’s obvious that a post is written by someone else, it usually is.

### **Videos**

Associations use video to

- promote programs and events
- as podcasts from leadership, GADs, or other association staff members
- as news records of Habitat builds and other member efforts
- as Code of Ethics reminders or pointers
- etc.

### **Mobile**

“Going mobile” might be a free, simple solution or something much bigger and more complex. That’s because it might involve

- technology platforms
- page designs that scale depending on the device
- stand-alone apps.

Can be as simple as enabling members to see key information from your website on their smartphones, tablets or other mobile devices.

## **Putting the tools to the test**

### **1. Can the technology help members make more money?**

**Facebook:** For some associations, Facebook is a great way to drive traffic to their website. Posting updates, notices about upcoming programs and events, and news that members are very interested in.

To help members make more money, post information and updates that members could share with their customers who are also on Facebook – for example, market

updates, latest local statistics about the housing rebound, articles about buying and selling, etc.

## 2. Is there a role for Pinterest in an association?

**Pinterest:** Like Facebook, if you produce information that REALTOR® s can share with to leverage their brand – like photos and infographics – then I say the answer is "maybe." But most REALTOR® associations don't have the time or people for that. That may be why only 32 REALTOR® associations are on Pinterest so far.

## 3. Video is popular, but is it too expensive to incorporate into an association's communication efforts?

To keep costs down, shoot the videos with a flip camera or smart phone, do some basic editing in iMovie and upload the videos to YouTube. YouTube videos are open to the public, although it is possible to "hide" the video and only share the URL selectively.

To get a higher quality end product, the association needs to buy an HD video camera, which will cost about \$4,500 and editing software such as Final Cut Pro. A staff video pro needs to operate the hardware and software; video production is a specialized skill and a talent.

Some assignments demand outside professional talent. Prices range. Camera crews charge approximately \$650/day and sound people charge \$450. In addition to cameras, you will need microphones, cameras and perhaps teleprompters – and it probably makes sense for you to buy rather than rent those tools.

If brand and reputation are important, a cheap date may not be in your best interest.

## 4. What are the costs and efforts for setup, and what does maintenance look like?

### **Blog:**

- Small upfront investment
- WordPress platform is free either hosted on the association's website servers or on Wordpress.com
- WordPress designs – called themes – usually cost less than \$100, and a designer can tweak a theme for a pretty small sum.
- For good results – member engagement, lively conversation, sharing of information – plan to post fresh content very regularly.
- If you don't have time to post every week, it's probably best to not start a blog.
- Blog posts should be short and conversational, so they are relatively easy to write.

Potential ideas a REALTOR® association could include in a blog

- Member spotlight (where each member answers the same three questions)
- list of upcoming events
- recap of legislative news
- reminders about member benefits,
- roundup of interesting articles
- first-person member stories

### **Facebook:**

Posting regular updates is important here as well. A Facebook page without regular updates is a very sad thing. But it may be easier than you think. You can post:

- links to your newsletter
- updates you make to your home page

Create an editorial calendar and promote different resources from your website every week. You'll be surprised at how many members don't know everything you have for them, let alone everything that your state association (if you're a local) and the National association offer.

### **Video:**

- There is not the same expectation that if there's one video, there will be a series.
- It's fine to create a single video about your area – and some associations in this room do just that. It can stay on your website, and it's useful both to members and to consumers.

Don't expect your videos to "go viral." People think if they create a video, thousands of people will see it, share it, blog about it, etc. You may have a very slim chance if your video is extremely original, clever, and relevant to everyone – and ideally, involve putting a cat in a blender. Otherwise, don't create videos with that expectation.

Real estate agents use video now, and will be using it more as time goes on. According to NAR, 14% of sellers said their agent used video to market their home in 2012, and 45% of buyers said virtual video tours on websites were very useful in their home searches. REALTOR® associations need to serve as role models and show agents what good videos look like.

## **5. Costs, benefits and usage – how many members will use the channels, and who are those members?**

### **Pinterest:**

Two most likely pockets of members:

1. Those who know about Pinterest and use it already to pin fashion, cooking, gardening, home décor, etc. If those interests appeal to many of your members, you should take note of that.
  - a. More than half of all REALTOR® s are women
  - b. The top age group on Pinterest is 25 to 34, though, so maybe it's your members who are moms.

Home décor is the third-most popular category on Pinterest. Create content about that – or repin images of home styles, specific rooms, decorating trends, etc.

*Find these members and follow them!*

The #2 reason for using Pinterest is to get inspired on what to buy. In the near future, agents may start posting their listings on Pinterest.

2. Those who are savvy about marketing and technology trends. For those members, share infographics about real estate, social media, tech tools, etc.

To measure effectiveness for your association, you need to decide what to measure:

- number of followers
- number of repins
- number of click-throughs to your website

## **6. Members say they want to access the association website, forms, MLS, etc. from their smartphones or tablets.**

Traffic to websites from mobile devices went up 103% from Fall 2011 to Summer 2012 -- but for most sites, it's still only about 4%. For real estate listing sites such as REALTOR® .com, Zillow, and Trulia, mobile constitutes half of their traffic or more.

Association sites are different. Members don't want to download forms to their phones – although they may want to download them onto their tablets, now or in the very near future.

You need to know what your members want to get from you on the go – both based on what they tell you and what your website's analytics show.

When your mobile traffic reaches a certain percentage, or when you get the budget for website improvements next, think about mobile. Some options:

- create an app for a conference
- implement a mobile theme, if you already use WordPress as your website platform

- create a mobile version of your site that leads off with your event calendar with the location and time spelled out, and includes key MLS forms, contact information, and a map to your office.

Here are 3 things to do immediately:

1. Make sure your key information – your address, phone number and email address – is displayed as text, not as part of a graphic.
2. Be sure that you don't only display important news as Flash, since iPhones and iPads can't see Flash content
3. Be sure that your login and class signups work from iPhones, Android smartphones, and Blackberries.

Especially with board of choice, you want to make sure that members who want to engage with you can do that easily.

## **7. Some committees want a Facebook page so they can discuss association business. Is this a good idea?**

It is not wise to set up groups for short-term use, such as committees.

- These particular groups are purely for business
- They usually want to share documents, which is functionality that Facebook doesn't have. A Google group might be a better option for these groups.

Thousands of groups are set up and abandoned. These groups could come up when a member is searching for your association's page, and it'll look like you are not active. Also, since Facebook's privacy settings change fairly regularly, there is a risk that private conversations might become public unintentionally, which you don't want either.

## **Recap and additional facts**

### **Facebook**

The fastest-growing segment of Facebook users is age 55 to 65.

According to a recent study by Association Trends, 50% of associations with a regional scope with fewer than 100 staff members are on Facebook. So REALTOR® associations are definitely ahead of the curve.

### **Pinterest**

Out of a total of 1,500 state and local REALTOR® associations, there are 31 on

Pinterest (plus NAR) as of early March 2013.

Most REALTOR® Associations are using Pinterest as another outlet for publishing information, some for agents and some for consumers. They are following members, real estate media outlets, marketing firms, local media, other associations, and other AEs and Communication Directors. Most don't "like" anything – they're not spending time surfing Pinterest and reacting to what they see, which would help them build community there.

Agents and real estate aggregators are using Pinterest to post listing photos, plans, buying and selling tips, neighborhood information and pictures, decorating trends, real estate trends, staging tips, promoting the use of a REALTOR®, etc.

Associations use Pinterest to recognize award winners, recommend books, give members a glimpse of their offices, get member input (in the form of "likes") on t-shirt or logo designs, share industry humor, post pictures of best practices, and raise awareness of people affected by the association's cause.

### Blog

A blog can be software that enables easy, fast publishing of news or updates online. The more popular use of a blog is to post online commentaries that invite interaction. Associations can have posts created by leadership or staff involved with PR, communications, government affairs, education, events, or technology.

### Videos

With video, there are so many things to consider!

Where to host them:

- If you host them on your website, you might need extra bandwidth.
- If you host them on YouTube, you can't control what people see after the video stops playing.
- If you host them on another external service, it might be really expensive.

Quality, cost, and turnaround time:

- If you want fast turnaround and decide to have a staff member shoot the video and make no edits, the quality might not be optimal.
- If you want optimal quality, it might take longer, and it will cost you something.

A recent Association Trends study found that 15% of associations with a regional scope with fewer than 100 staff members are using video. So REALTOR® associations are ahead of the curve there too.

### Mobile

People are starting to visit websites from their smartphones. What is still evolving are

best practices for how to make websites most easily accessed from a mobile phone. The key to the smartest decision here is having an educated, informed idea about what people want from your site when they're on the go.

Since smartphones are basically small computers, you may decide that a website that works from a phone is fine. But...

- Can members log in with your existing Association Management System from their phone?
- Is the critical information on your home page conveyed through Flash, which won't display on an iPad or iPhone?
- Can members register for classes from their phones and tablets?

Other options:

- Create a mobile versions of your sites. Some WordPress themes include mobile templates. But what does that look like? For example, some completely eliminate images, which would create challenges if you communicate key information only through images.
- Create mobile apps, usually for news/calendar or for major meetings with complex schedules. In general, mobile apps are losing popularity, while mobile sites are gaining.
- Adopting "responsive design," which displays information in a way that's optimized for whatever device someone is using to see it. If you're not redesigning, keep this information in mind until you are.

### Explaining your decisions to members

When you ask the right questions and make a decision about whether or not to go forward with a particular tech tool or social media channel, be ready to explain and defend your decision.

- Show that your decision is based on the business value – input, value, and hard and soft costs
- Put it into context for your members. Explain that they, too, make decisions like this for their own business every day.

Some associations of every size are using social media and other online tools. It depends on your priorities. ***You can do anything, but you can't do everything.***

Choose digital tools and web presences that will help you reach your members more effectively, that will help your members succeed, and that are possible and practical to keep fresh and updated regularly.

And if you do decide to add a new channel or tool, be realistic, since you are probably



already maxed out on people and time. ***In order to do this, we'll have to stop doing something else. What can we stop doing?***

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