

Columnists

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Using social media to communicate, learn about 'green' matters

If you're interested in "green" matters, you can learn a lot using social media.

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Environmental awareness, education and activism all rely on communication. But communication isn't what it used to be.

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and blogs have transformed mass communication, turning it into a two-way street. For those of us interested in "green" matters, online social networking provides increased opportunities to understand environmental issues, find eco-friendly products or share our green views.

Q: Isn't Facebook mostly just for personal connections?

A: Facebook became a household word by connecting friends and family, but many businesses and groups now use it for marketing and organizing. Locally based environmental organizations with thousands of Facebook "likes" (people following them on Facebook) include Washington Toxics Coalition, Seattle Tilth, Washington Trails Association and Climate Solutions.

Q: For communicating about green issues, should I use Twitter or Facebook?

A: Some users prefer Twitter because messages are short (a maximum of 140 letters or characters) and it's easy to learn. But those who use Facebook heavily in their personal lives may prefer Facebook for environmental communications as well.

Q: How do I get started using social media as a green communications tool?

A: Choose a type of social media, make a little time and just start playing with it. Do online searches for green topics or organizations to follow. If you've never used social media, ask a friend to help you sign up.

Any group, business or agency will benefit from using at least one form of social media to connect with members or customers. Blogging (maintaining a public online journal, or "web log") is often a good fit for educational and activist groups.

Before long, people will expect all organizations and businesses to use social media, just like they expect them to have a website.

But don't use social media just because you feel obligated. It shows, and you won't be effective. If you represent a business or group but you don't enjoy using social media for work, find someone in your organization who does.

Q: What's new in social media?

A: New forms of social networking get introduced every day, and the latest one to really catch on is called Pinterest. Think of it as an online bulletin board. Pinterest (the name combines "pin" and "interest") allows you to create virtual "pinboards" simply by clicking on a photo or graphic on any website.

Started just two years ago, Pinterest now boasts more than 20 million users and is an especially good source for green do-it-yourself craft ideas.

Emphasizing visuals rather than words, Pinterest can be an appealing social media alternative if you don't love Facebook or Twitter. Unlike most social media, you need an invitation to join Pinterest, but it's easy to get one from a friend, or you can request one through www.Pinterest.com.

Q: Do I need a "smartphone" to use social media?

A: No. Smartphones make it quick and easy to access social media, but all you really need is a computer and an Internet connection.

Q: How about more examples of how social media can help expand my personal green horizons?

A: No matter what your green passion is, you can find people to connect with about it. For example, more than 60 different Twitter accounts focus on electric vehicles. Once you find two or three, with an online search or a friend's recommendation, those will quickly lead to more.

Or let's say you have a direct question, such as, "Where's a good shoe-repair shop on the Eastside?" Once you gather a core of green connections on Twitter and Facebook, you will find a font of helpful answers.

Blogs provide troves of information on any green topic imaginable, from raising chickens to fixing your dishwasher. YouTube videos, another type of social media, can show you how to do practically anything.

Q: If I use social media to learn more about environmental issues, does that make me a nerd?

A: Probably. But these days, that's not such a bad thing.

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