Social Networking: How it Can Help Advance Our Profession

I never thought I would call myself a "blogger." However, following a quick demonstration of some user-friendly, free software (Wordpress and Blogger are the most popular) and a test run, I was hooked! Blogging is relatively easy and is written in a simple, conversational tone. Through the Georgia Forestry Commission (GFC)'s new Sustainable Community Forestry Program (SCFP) Blog, we provide a growing network of readers with news and information about a myriad of urban forestry topics, including special events, workshops, and timely studies.

It's no wonder social media has become such a phenomenon. It allows people to connect and communicate their thoughts and opinions, creating conversations in an online world. Plus, it provides critical, real-time information that we would normally spend thousands of dollars to collect through focus groups and market research. This means a lot when there is little or no budget to spend. For GFC, having a social media presence is also about participating where the target audience is—the consumer interested in going green, actively engaged with their family and friends and turning to online social networks and communities.

The most successful blogs interact with readers by posting interesting, relevant information and soliciting discussions through comments, links to other relevant blogs, and trackbacks (a means for authors to keep track of who is linking to their blog). Successful participation engages that audience by providing appealing content and ideas that generate feedback. On the SCFP Blog, simple comments mean a great deal. A recent post, "I only wanted to say thanks for all the great info found on your blog—even helped me with my work recently—keep it up!" is just one indication that we are on the right track.

I blog about a wide range of topics. Most of them relate to the latest speakers I've heard, articles in industry magazines, or new products exhibitors bring to our conferences. For me, the hardest part of having a blog is finding the time to write it, which is why guest authors are always welcome. My goal is to write a new article once a month, but that's not enough to generate the valuable conversation and feedback we need in urban forestry to establish a broader national presence. A posting schedule of three to four times a week is recommended and bloggers should respond to comments within 24 hours.

In addition to blogging, SCFP uses several social media tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. This allows our audience to connect back to the blog and respond to messages they are exposed to, thereby driving traffic to the blog.

I hope some of you will start new blogs after reading this. Remember, your comments and replies are always welcome on the GFC Sustainable Community Forestry Blog at *gfccommunityforestry.wordpress.com*. Follow me on Twitter @Treegirl, and on Facebook too. I'll be watching for you!

—Susan Reisch, Urban & Community Forestry Coordinator, Georgia Forestry Commission

With so much happening in urban and community forestry these days it's a real task to stay current. Everyday our e-mails are inundated with so much information it can be overwhelming. Although keeping up with e-mail is important, for most of us, there is higher priority work that must be done—but it's a Catch-22 situation, because in order to do our work, most of us need our e-mail.

For many years, e-mail listserves have been used to direct focused information and discussion. An excellent example is Tree Link's (*www.treelink.org*) UCF e-mail list (previously called urbNRnet) that provides a forum on issues related to urban and community forests and tends to draw tree care professionals. Professional membership listserves such as the Society of Municipal Arborist's provide a wealth of information. Questions are posed and members respond—sometime for days—discussing topics of interest.

More recently, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds have become a useful tool for publishing frequently updated information in a standardized format. The beauty of RSS feeds is that they automatically update and users can aggregate many feeds into one location like a website or web browser homepage such as Google. The U.S. Forest Service Urban Forestry South website (*www.urbanforestrysouth.org*) has a number of RSS feeds that advance urban forestry. Feeds include a library of resources, research citations, social science, presentations, newsletter articles, and even web links.

Blogs have become more and more popular in recent years. Arbor Day Foundation's Blog (*arborday.tumblr. com*) covers news, tales of tree planting, and resources

that further their mission. Casey Trees of Washington DC has a blog that focuses on urban tree canopy efforts by location; there is an RSS feed directly to their blog (*www.caseytrees.org/about/blog*). Blogs can also be posted to your Facebook page or to Twitter. On Twitter, a simple search of urban and community forestry brings up a wealth of information, much of it related to what's happening on the ground across the U.S.

Using these new advances in electronic media may seem time-consuming at first, but they automate how we receive information, ensure its timeliness, and allow us to become proactive in promoting a greater understanding of the value of trees in communities and cities. This ultimately can transcend into greater public support for what we do.

This year, the State of Maryland worked in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and Davey Institute to further develop the concept of a tree benefits calculator that allows property owners and communities to see how investing in trees pays off in dollars and cents over time. While existing calculators provide valuable information about individual trees, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Forest Service wanted users to see the *collective* effect of multiple trees on energy, property values, stormwater management, and other factors. So they developed an expanded tool based on a pre-existing Casey Trees calculator and i-Tree STRATUM (now called i-Tree Streets) street tree assessment data.

Now part of the State's *Smart, Green, & Growing* initiative, Maryland citizens can calculate the value of their trees and then register them on the State's Marylanders Plant Trees website (*www.trees.maryland.gov*). Last spring, the website was formally unveiled on Maryland's Arbor Day. A Maryland teacher's use of the social networking site Facebook generated so much attention to activities related to the calculator that the Maryland Department of Natural Resources is considering using social networking media for outreach and promotion of natural resource events.

This is just one really great example of how social networking can help us engage new audiences. A series of educational webcasts are currently being planned on how you can learn to use RSS feeds and social networking sites to promote what we do. Take the time now. Subscribe to the U.S. Forest Service Urban Natural Resource Institute's electronic mailing list (*www.unri.org*) and take the first step in making a difference.

—*Donna Murphy, Landscape Architect and Technology Transfer Specialist, U.S. Forest Service, Northeastern Area, State and Private Forestry*

When email and the Internet first came into widespread use in the early 1990s, I remember putting together a talk for my local ISA chapter conference on "Arboriculture and the Internet." My, how archaic that presentation seems now. Back then the Internet was mostly an "information superhighway"... with a little bit of commerce thrown in. Today, it has become a diverse hub of our personal and professional lives through what is alternatively called "social networking" or "virtual communities." In the last year or two I've definitely seen the entire phenomena go mainstream in my work world as well ... moving from social to professional.

One thing I find most fascinating about social networking is the melding of personal and professional lives. I remember when I first joined Facebook, my 25-year-old daughter decided I was "hip!" I took that as a compliment! My Facebook friend list is an eclectic mix of personal friends, professional colleagues, and people I used to know better but have grown distant from by virtue of time or place. For me, the lines between work and personal life continue to be blurred by social networking.

Of course, there are tools such as LinkedIn that mimic some of the social networking characteristics of other sites, but for professional purposes. LinkedIn is a virtual community that connects people in the work world much like Facebook does in a more social setting. Business uses for social networking are still evolving. I have built a couple of virtual communities on Ning, a virtual community site. One of these is the alumni site for graduates of the Municipal Forestry Institute (MFI). This site is by invitation only and gives participants a site to share professional interests. Pictures, videos, and blog entries can be posted for users to see.

One hindrance to this use is that some companies or public agencies have information technology (IT) policies that haven't kept pace with the changing uses of these tools. Some IT policies ban the accessing of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other sites because they don't want their employees "wasting" time on them. These three sites in particular started out primarily for social rather than professional purposes. However, the most forward-thinking companies and public agencies today are realizing that these sites have enormous value for promoting urban forestry as well.

—*Paul Ries, Urban and Community Forestry Program Manager, Oregon Department of Forestry*

MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter were terms I was familiar with around the house with my young teenagers, but I did not make the connection that these social networking sites could be useful on the job until I attended MFI in 2008 and listened to the advice of Ed

Barlow, a futurist. Mr. Barlow encouraged us to learn new technologies, to think out of the box, and to learn a new language. He taught us to embrace change and be ready for new ways to enhance our skills. For me, my new language was learning to read blogs and to social network.

My first experience with social networking came out of MFI. As a graduate of the program, I had access to a website, the Municipal Forestry Institute Alumni Network, created exclusively for those of us who went through MFI. Through it, I was able to keep the momentum of the classes going for myself while building friendships with colleagues across the globe. It has been helpful to read other arborists' questions and comments when I was contemplating how to handle new situations at work.

My employer, the City of Virginia Beach, Virginia encouraged the use of podcasts as informational tools for different departments, and it even hosted a Facebook 101 session. I joined Facebook after learning that many of my co-workers were using the network ... and to see what my teens were up to. I enjoy getting snapshots of what is going on out in the world. There is plenty of time in between meetings or at lunch to check the status of interesting Facebook friends. I have a mix of friends, relatives, nonprofit organizations, trade organizations, coworkers, and even a couple of invasive insects as my Facebook friends. I have a better understanding of what is happening in my community now than before I started on Facebook, especially when it comes to non-profit groups.

I became a Twitter member when SMA announced that it would be "tweeting" at the annual conference in Savannah. I thought it was going to be just like Facebook, but it is quite different; in fact, I found it even more pleasing to use. Facebook has a lot of extra applications many people enjoy such as tending a virtual farm, taking daily quizzes, or starting a food fight with your friends—these are not for me. Twitter will let you "follow" someone through web links or a brief statement. Twitter has been a great way for me to find new information on hot topics such as climate change, green infrastructure, and tree conservation efforts from around the globe. I find Twitter friendlier to use on my mobile phone and can check on updates without much effort.

By using social networks, urban foresters can stay on top of the latest business, industry, and social trends that frame our society and at the same time, we can spread the word of the benefits of urban forests and why they are important for us to manage.

—*Kristina Salzman, City Arborist, Virginia Beach, Virginia*

With the relatively recent advent of social networking, many urban forestry professionals are wondering not only what all the fuss is about, but also what, if any, can be gained from participating in *social* networks. I believe that the overarching reticence is due to two factors: a natural fear of the unknown, and a widespread notion that the very term "social" connotes a lack of seriousness or even a lack of professionalism. Frankly, nothing could be further from the truth.

Admittedly, the public face of social networking has been portrayed by the inane postings of people who take delight in informing the world of their every day-to-day activity. Very few of us care about someone's taxi rides, their lunch menu quandaries, or their "bad hair" days.

If we look deeper, though, we can begin to see the advantages by simply replacing the word "social" with the word "professional." Professional networking is one of the fundamental strengths of the SMA. It is reflected in the camaraderie we enjoy, the exchange of information and ideas, and the ability of our members to rely on the experiences and knowledge of each other's professional diversity. Twitter, Facebook, and the other such sites provide an easy to use means of connecting with our peers.

On an even more interesting note, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the creators of ARPANet, precursor to the Internet, recently held the Red Balloon Network Challenge. DARPA announced the Network Challenge to explore how broad-scope problems can be tackled using social networking tools. The Challenge explored basic research issues such as mobilization, collaboration, and trust in diverse social networking constructs and could serve to fuel innovation across a wide spectrum of applications.

The Challenge was designed to force participating teams to network quickly, expansively, and efficiently to identify the locations of 10 red weather balloons located in diverse places across the U.S. The implications of the exercise are the ability to study human interaction, information exchange, and mobilization in, for example, disaster response, a subject familiar to most urban foresters.

Simply put, as professionals, we can only gain from enhanced opportunity to collaborate and to communicate. Gone are the days when a single annual conference could provide ample exposure to new ideas and peer relationships. Sharing info, breaking news, pictures, and even learning opportunities is the name of the game. Having a little fun in the process couldn't hurt, either. I challenge every SMA member to try it out. ✒

—*Steve Shurtz, SMA Web Committee Chair, Urban Forestry & Landscape Manager, City of Baton Rouge, Louisiana*