

# SOCIAL NETWORKING:

FINDING WAYS TO INCORPORATE  
SOCIAL MEDIA INTO THE  
FOREST PRODUCTS INDUSTRY



Online  
Share Social  
Internet Blo  
**Web 2.0**  
Networking M  
Chat Friend  
Connection

By Iris B. Montague, Research Forester, USDA Forest Service

In the past two decades, the Internet has become a very important tool: it has changed the way we obtain information, the way we communicate, and even the way we conduct business. Today, 24 percent of all Americans have three or more computers in the home and Americans spend an average of 19 hours online each week. In addition to the fact that the Internet plays a huge role in people's lives, businesses all over the world have embraced the Internet and are using this technology to enhance business activities and productivity.

One newer Internet trend, social media networking, allows people to maintain their social relationships. In a recent study, 52 percent of Internet users stated that the Internet was important or very important in helping them maintain their social relationships ([www.digitalcenter.org](http://www.digitalcenter.org)). Social networking also has given businesses the ability to develop "social" relationships with their customers. Businesses can be "up close and personal" with myriad consumers – a connection that was not possible before the introduction of the Internet and social media.

Social media networks give forest products producers a new outlet to pass along information and services to their customers and the public.

### What Is Social Media?

Social media has been defined in many different ways. One definition is "any online tool that allows social interaction between groups of people through the sharing of content, profiles, opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives." These tools may include message boards, podcasts, blogs, micro blogs, livestreams, bookmarks, networks, communities, wikis, and vlogs. There currently are hundreds of social media network sites available online that cover a wide range of interests (i.e., business, politics, dating, cooking, fashion) and cater to nearly every demographic group.

### What Does Social Media Have To Do With Us?

Hardwood products companies benefit from having personal contact with their customers. To these customers, it is vital to have quality products delivered in a timely manner and at a reasonable price. Customers also expect to be kept well informed of any forestry/forest products-related news or trends that may affect their bottom-line. Although the major companies may have well developed networks, typical producers are smaller companies that lack the networks of their larger counterparts. In an industry where the primary product produced (lumber) often is considered a commodity, it is often difficult to compete based on product differentiation and price.

Social media networks give forest products producers a new outlet to pass along information and services to their customers and the public. These networks also provide a new method for companies to differentiate themselves from competitors.

In most cases, a company can register on a social media site for free. Given the current economic conditions, these sites provide a powerful and cost-effective tool to smaller companies that do not have the capital to allocate to large marketing/advertising expenditures.

The Internet is available all over the world, providing companies access to markets that were previously out of reach. Social media not only allows companies to reach these markets, it also allows them to communicate directly with customers and develop relationships. In a global economy, this is a very important component to businesses staying competitive. Social media also allows businesses to build and enhance their reputation and profile online. Who better to inform the public about a company and its activities than the company itself?

## What Can We Do On a Social Media Network?

Because of the wide-ranging orientations of the different social media sites, the utility of these sites is often limited only by the imagination. Consumer awareness, customer service, product customization, supply chain networking, consumer data collection, and other communication activities may be conducted using one or another of these forums and sites.

If you and your company choose to ignore the world of social media, you risk losing access to new markets and customers.

Some forest products industry members already have found ways to utilize social media networks in their daily business activities. Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are examples of popular sites that companies have incorporated into their business strategies.<sup>[1]</sup> Blogging has become an important way for people with similar interest to communicate. Unlike mass email distribution, blogs can be viewed by anyone and are not restricted to a set of email addresses. Members in the forest products community use blogs to discuss current legislation that may impact business such as the Lacey Act or the American Clean Energy and Security Act. These blogs also have been used to discuss topics such as the beauty of hardwood flooring and the importance of safety in woodworking. The subjects and information that can be discussed in blogs are infinite.

In an industry where the visual characteristics of a product are very important, vlogs can be used as a visual way to showcase products or an activity. Vlogs are video blogs that have been utilized by forest products companies to display the aesthetic qualities of floors, furniture, and other forest products. They also have been used to inform the public about wood related processes, such as furniture making, lumber cutting, and even paper making. Vlogs allow consumers to view products and processes in the comfort of their homes.

Through social media sites, businesses can also post relevant, up-to-date information about their company and its activities. This allows forest products companies to inform the public about community service projects in which they are participating. It allows them to post business contact information, as well as product prices and store hours. It gives them the ability to post hiring notices and reach potential employees that may have been overlooked. Because people are no longer relying on traditional printed media and look to the Internet first for information, these outlets are an important way to deliver information. Although most social media sites are similar to websites, these sites allow social interaction, can be located through search engines, and can be used to direct traffic to a company's main Web page.

## Are There Other Forest Product Companies On a Social Media Network?

Some may be surprised to hear that there are forest product companies who are currently using social media sites. A search on Facebook revealed that there were over 500 pages dedicated to lumber and wood products. Similar Internet searches revealed numerous blogs about forest products, forestry, and woodworking as well as Twitter posts from Lumber Liquidator and similar companies.

An Internet search also revealed that NHLA member, Baillie Lumber, was incorporating social media into its business strategy. Company spokesperson, Jill Meyer, said Baillie first joined Facebook in December 2009 and started a blog in March 2010. While the company is a beginner in the social media world, it may be ahead of many of its counterparts. Though Meyer says it is too early to determine what impact these tools are having on business, company executives feel the future of the forest products industry depends on developing new ideas/ways to service customers. Meyer also thinks social

*(Continued on page 15)*

## SOCIAL NETWORKING

*(Continued from page 10)*

media networking is an easy, time and cost-efficient tool that will allow it to reach new markets and provide new services to consumers.

### Why Should My Company Join the Social Media Trend?

Some may think that social media is just a current fad that will soon pass, but recent studies show otherwise. There are now more than a million Websites that are integrated with Facebook, 65 percent of the world's top 100 companies are using Twitter, and 24 hours of video content is uploaded every minute on YouTube ([www.burson-marsteller.com](http://www.burson-marsteller.com)). These statistics demonstrate how relevant social media is today and reveals that numerous companies have realized social media networking is beneficial for their business.

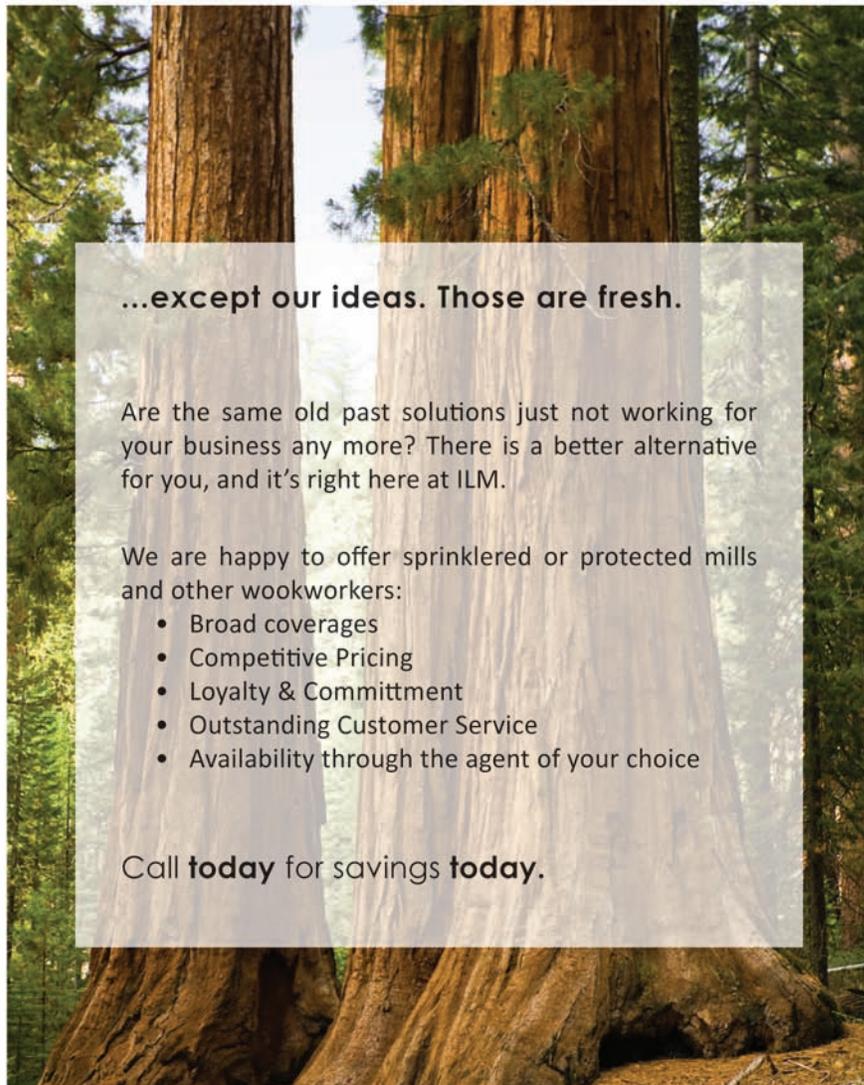
The forest products industry, often regarded as a fragmented industry that lags in technology adoption, could benefit from the social interaction of these outlets. Social media networks offer forest products companies the ability to communicate with the public and obtain up-to-date information on current trends. Information that would take days and even months to travel within business networks is now available with a click of a button. In most cases, the Internet is the first place consumers look to find products and services. These social media tools can be used as a reputation builder and as a tool to enhance competitive advantage among competitors, domestic and abroad.

It is important to remember that there is no "one-size fits all." Although the use of Facebook or Twitter may be very effective for one company, a daily blog may work better for another depending on goals and the amount of time a company wants to invest in social media development. With hundreds of social media sites available, there is an opportunity for a company to develop a mix of social media strategies that meets its goals. Even if you feel sure social media has nothing to offer your company and customers, you should take time to investigate social media

networking before deciding. Because most sites are free, if your company starts down this road and you later decide that social media is not working, you can delete your account without any financial penalties. On the other hand, if you and your company choose to ignore the world of social media, you risk losing access to new markets and customers. ■

[1] Mention of any social media sites/services or companies is not meant as an endorsement, but merely provided as examples for the convenience of readers. Additional information about the sites mentioned can be found on their respective Web pages.

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