

# social studies

Marketing, connecting, and communicating in the digital age

BY BECKY SPEVACK

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**Social Media.** If you haven't heard of it yet, it's about time you do. You may be wondering: What is it, and how does it apply to the practice of architecture? And isn't it a bit ironic to address digital technologies within the pages of a print magazine? All good questions which will be answered in due time. But first, as you begin to read this article, ask yourself: How is my firm being marketed? And how do I want my work to be perceived by others?

I am sitting here, trying to determine how to begin this article, how to tackle this topic of social media. While it is something I use daily, it somehow eludes definition. So I sign in to Facebook to see what others are up to. "Writing about big, abstract ideas makes my head hurt," I post for my 155 friends to read. Perhaps not the most eloquent way to put it, but it gets the point across. As I scroll down, I am connected to people from across the world, spanning from a childhood neighbor and playmate (who now lives in Florence, Italy and is often traveling the globe) to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, from individual architects (and their firms) to AIA chapters across the continent (AIA|LA wishes everyone a happy earth day!).



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The evolution of a website: SPRINGBOARD's website (top to bottom) in 2003, 2006 and 2009.

And just like that, I know how to describe it: **Social media are the tools created to connect people, regardless of location or circumstance.** They allow us to create a virtual community and put the controls in our hands. We are able to guide and define how we are represented and who we interact with, reaching as broad or limited an audience as we choose.

## WEB SIGHTING

If you were able to attend Build Pittsburgh this past April, you may have noticed a session entitled “New Media Revolution”, which (similar to this article) explored what tools are available digitally, and how to use them as marketing devices. One of the presenters, Paul Rosenblatt, AIA, proffered his own experiences/forays into the world of websites and social media. As founding principal of SPRINGBOARD Architecture Communication Design LLC, he has long acknowledged the need to be connected via the digital world, but the way in which the firm has tackled that connection has evolved as he and other firm members better understood what that process can look like.

Founded in October of 2001, SPRINGBOARD launched their first website in spring of 2003 – a point in time where many firms did not yet have a website. “Since we are interested in how technology can leverage our practice in terms of speed, accuracy, efficiency – and creativity – creating a website to reflect this was a natural extension of our practice,” Rosenblatt remembers, but acknowledges that the initial decision to create a website presented many challenges, including a small portfolio, limited budget, and lack of experience in web design. The firm had an intern who could code in HTML and asked him to develop some concepts based on the design of their studio space. “He did a great job animating the site,” Rosenblatt gives credit where it is due, although admits that the site had a major flaw – it was nearly impossible to update. “As soon as we had projects to add, we had a real problem. On top of that, we couldn’t announce anything, or add news.... We didn’t know any better, but we learned quickly.”

A new site was released to the public in 2006, but it too created challenges for the firm. A more static, portfolio-style site, it was easy to update but lacked sophistication and did not attract views unless a firm member sent someone directly to it. After about a year, Rosenblatt started researching website optimization and wondering how to make SPRINGBOARD's website a more prominent destination.

The current site went live in 2009, and incorporates a blog-based news section and provisions to distribute white papers and other materials. "Over the years, I have realized that a company's website is really dynamic. To be effective, it needs to stimulate two-way communication, to encourage people to participate in it and be regularly refreshed to bring people back to see what is new. Right now, I am always thinking about how I can use it more creatively."

## BECOMING SOCIAL

There are a number of social media applications available, each offering a slightly different or unique experience, allowing you to connect with others in a specific way (see "Getting Started", page 11). Obviously, the more you use, the larger and more varied your online community will become, creating a greater dialogue and more potential or opportunity. While you need to do what you are comfortable with, you should also remember to push yourself/push your bounds. What's available in the world of social media will only continue to grow and advance.

Facebook, the most commonly used social media site, is a place many firms have made their own. Through registering as a business, you are able to garner a following of other users; provide pertinent firm information; create photo albums, uploading images from portfolios; and release timely updates – an open house, design award, project completion, et cetera.



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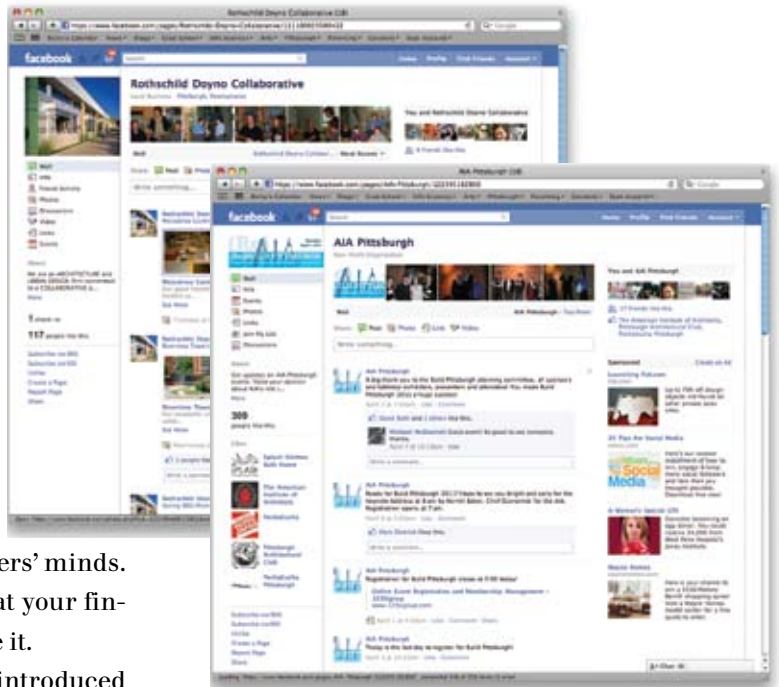
PAUL ROSENBLATT, AIA



One firm that has been taking advantage of what Facebook has to offer is Rothschild Doyno Collaborative (RDC). In the year since joining the site, the firm has made a habit of putting their work, and their work environment, out there for all to see. RDC has assembled over 45 photo albums, highlighting projects, firm events, their office life, public outreach, and more. This frequent updating gives their followers – 115 of them! – a continual stream of firm news, keeping them towards the forefront of viewers' minds. Virtually free marketing is available at your fingertips, if you will take the time to use it.

David Roth, AIA, meanwhile, was introduced to social networking via LinkedIn. "I started business networking with LinkedIn to stay in touch with colleagues, and then began to use it more as part of recent job search(es)." Looking towards a future of collaboration, not competition, his network now has over 400 people in it, representing a variety of fields – from the arts to science, and all points in between. "These cross-discipline relationships will be the forum for future innovative projects, particularly in the fields of design and sustainability," he predicts.

AIA Pittsburgh has also embraced these online communities, actively maintaining both a Facebook page and a LinkedIn group. In under two years, the organization's Facebook page has over 300 followers, and is used to post updates about events related to the design community, another way to reach out to architects about the professional development opportunities they are creating. The LinkedIn group – "AIA Pittsburgh - Collaborate" – was created in May of 2009 as a response to the Unemployed Architects Group that AIA Pittsburgh had started as a biweekly lunch meeting in response to the mass layoffs earlier that year. The LinkedIn group became a place for those architects and others to discuss and share job opportunities, marketing ideas, economic news, and much more. It created a feeling of inclusion and community at a time when many were left feeling professionally stranded.




Rothschild Doyno Collaborative and AIA Pittsburgh have each established a lively presence on Facebook.



David Roth, AIA launched a blog (theenergybubble.blogspot.com) about the converging effect of the energy crisis and the housing bubble.


# getting started

A look at some popular ways people are connecting




**LinkedIn:** A great first step for those of you wary of social media, LinkedIn is “a business oriented social networking site, used mainly for professional networking.” Once registered with the site, a user can create a profile which can include education and employment information, similar to a resume. You can reach out to associates by “connecting” with them, create a company profile, or join any number of groups, which focus on a specific topic or interest. The permission-based approach, in which any contact with another professional requires a pre-existing relationship or the intervention of a contact of theirs, is intended to build trust among users.

**Facebook:** The most widely used social networking tool there is, Facebook use was initially limited to college students, but gradually expanded; now, anyone 13 or older can become a user. Users of Facebook create a personal profile, can upload pictures, add other users as “friends”, post status updates, message others, “like” any number of topics, companies, or activities, and generally keep in touch with one another.




**Twitter:** Twitter is a microblogging service, or a place where you can write about anything, within the confines of 140 characters. (For your reference, that previous sentence was 121 characters.) You can follow what other people write about or you can contribute your own thoughts, messages called ‘tweets’.

**Architizer:** Architizer describes itself as “a way for architects to interact, show their work, and find clients.” It is a social network created exclusively for architecture, a place where design professionals can upload project images. Anyone can join, so thousands of design enthusiasts have access to your work everyday.



**YouTube:** YouTube is a video sharing site, where users can upload their own videos or view what others have uploaded. This can be a good place to put videos on the web that are then linked back or embedded into your own website or blog.

**Blogs:** A blog is a type of website (or sometimes part of a website) that functions as a record of one’s thoughts, ideas, commentaries, etc. It can also function on a more professional level as the place where an individual or company posts information on a regular basis about products, events, or important announcements. 

## GOT AN IDEA? GET IT OUT THERE

Everyone has a blog these days. No really, *everyone*. Don't believe me? As of 2010, there were over 150 million blogs out there (as tracked by BlogPulse). That's right, I said *million*. So why add your two cents? Because your perspective is unique. And because there is someone, somewhere out there, who has similar interests and is looking to read what others have to say about it. Rosenblatt can attest to this. "I am a 'vinyl junkie' and write a music blog about my passion for records – [blog.vinylrecordarchitect.com](http://blog.vinylrecordarchitect.com). Although my blog is not about architecture... it reflects who I am and what I am involved with creatively and intellectually." One record store owner even found SPRINGBOARD via Rosenblatt's blog and hired the firm.

Roth is also among the many bloggers out there, penning [theenergybubble.blogspot.com](http://theenergybubble.blogspot.com). More directly tied to Roth's professional identity, it was "launched as a by-product of my ongoing research about the converging effect of the energy crisis and housing bubble." The blog is made up of a collection of articles and commentary, presented three times a week. "It's a simple process and pretty automatic now, with about a half hour spent researching topics each morning while I have my coffee."

## WHY YOU NEED TO SIGN-ON AND LOG-IN

Over these pages I have provided examples of how others are using social media tools, what they are doing. So what should you be doing?



Paul Rosenblatt, AIA shares his love for records on his personal blog ([blog.vinylarchitect.com](http://blog.vinylarchitect.com)).

How does one decide how to approach this myriad of social media choices? First, you need to create accounts for yourself – pick a username, a password, and log-in. Find people or groups or blogs that interest you, and follow them. Comment on what they have to share, make your voice heard.

"Social media provides me with new ways I can 'socialize' with a lot of people I haven't even met," Rosenblatt notes. "[It] enables me to reach far greater numbers of people than ever before." Roth whole-heartedly agrees. "This collaborative spirit is at the core of business networking, as it's a way to showcase our experiences.... We're all in it together, learning each day about the great works of others." It may just seem like a keyboard and computer screen to you today, but give it a week or two, and you will start to see a community evolve. You will find yourself connecting with colleagues, clients, friends, relatives, and others from around the world, participating in an interactive dialogue greater than the sum of the parts (or people).

"It is not advertising," says Rosenblatt, "it's making contact with folks, using digital technology. There is nothing wrong with new means of communication – new tools have been evolving for centuries." He acknowledges that it can be intimidating, that there are many options and it can feel like a waste of time, but he feels it's not a waste, just different. And worth it. "To not use social media, you are closing the door to so many potential interactions." C

