



ILLUSTRATION BY FRANCESCO BONGIORNI

THE SOCIAL NETWORK

IT'S A DESIGN CONVERSATION YOU SHOULDN'T BE MISSING.

By Julie Taraska

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Whether you shrink from social media or easily jump into it, there's considerable confusion about what it is and the value it can bring interior designers. It's most effective when designers tap into its "social" component. Think of it as a virtual cocktail party where you've personally selected each guest. You've curated the conversation topics and chosen how you'd like to engage—via words or pictures, in short bursts or long posts, passively or actively. "It is about talking to people on a human level," says Rich Holschuh of Adroyt, a social-media consultancy that counts New York design emporium Moss among its clients. It can include networking sites (LinkedIn, Facebook), blogging platforms (WordPress, Twitter), and image-sharing entities (YouTube, Tumblr, Flickr). The majority of these technologies are free, and all are easy to learn.

Yet unlike with traditional marketing, the most successful social-media

users don't aim for a direct sell. In fact, only broadcasting your company's news is considered bad form. Rather, their goal is to foster relationships through sharing knowledge with members in their online communities. Just like in the real world, where enough visits to your corner bar eventually transforms you into a regular, participating steadily in an online community makes you one of the gang, someone people know and trust. This includes the media looking for experts with insights and interesting points of view. A recent survey from Arketi Web Watch Media reports that 92 percent of journalists use LinkedIn—more than any other social network.

Yet many designers are still reluctant to use social media for professional gains. According to a survey conducted last April by *Interior Design* magazine, only 63 percent of the 2,359 respondents had profiles on LinkedIn. A mere 44 percent read blogs, while just 34 percent had a Facebook page. Twitter and YouTube fared worse, with each garnering 23 percent or less of mentions. Flickr and Tumblr didn't register at all, surprising considering how visual a field interior design is.

But some design firms are bucking the trend. Take HOK. The multinational



IIDA ONLINE

IIDA is generating an actively engaged design community with a presence on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, and Vimeo, and the momentum is accelerating.

IIDA HQ's Facebook page has 16,720 fans, up 58 percent this year, with over 4 million page views. On Twitter, there's more than 8,000 followers (@IIDA_HQ). Coming up, IIDA HQ will host Facebook live-stream chats and Twitter chats. On HQ's LinkedIn page, there's a bounty of wide-ranging conversations, from 2012 color trends to thoughtful advice for those posting career questions, job leads, and sourcing initiatives.

IIDA Chapters are using social media to post jobs, share professional advice, exchange news and photos about social and professional events, and announce competitions and CEU opportunities. The most active chapters on Facebook right now?—New England and Texas/Oklahoma. New York wins out on Twitter.

firm dipped its toes into social media in 2008. "We wanted to attract the best people and showcase our unique culture," says HOK chief marketing officer Beth Bernitt, ASID, LEED AP, of the company's then-aims. Since, HOK has expanded its online efforts dramatically. Two members of the communications team now spend eight to 10 hours a week each maintaining eight blogs (including "Life at HOK," its content written entirely by employees); six Facebook pages; two Twitter accounts; YouTube and Flickr channels; and a LinkedIn page. The efforts have been a boon for the firm's human resources, marketing, and public relations departments, but they've also improved communication among HOK employees. "No matter where in the world our designers are sitting or what they are working on, they can see the big picture of what HOK is doing," Bernitt adds.

Social media is great for the macro level, but it also is fruitful on the micro. Gensler principal Carlos Martinez, FIIDA, uses his Twitter feed and four Tumblr blogs as online filing cabinets, sharing articles about the workplace, products, art, and design issues beyond his professional scope of interiors and architecture. He culls much of the content from stories that appear in his Zite magazine, an iPad app that uses algorithms and past preferences to suggest relevant news pieces. Martinez spends about 90 minutes a day reading Zite and posting relevant articles. "Then, when I'm telling my team about one, I can go back to my own blog or tweets, find it, and pass it on," he explains. "I no

longer have to rip pieces out and then struggle to locate them." The practice came in handy recently when he was competing for a client and realized he had read an article that would bolster his team's case. "The speed and ease with which I was able to extract it from my posts were extremely valuable," he says. "We put it in a presentation and were able to secure the relationship."

Vicente Wolf, of the namesake New York interior design boutique, utilizes the technology in an even more granular way: to interact with other designers and bring up professional issues he's having. His in-house PR team spends a few hours each day on Facebook, adding images of his latest projects and conversing with his 4,800 friends. The team also helps manage his multidisciplinary blog, which features his popular "Ask Vicente" column, where anyone with a decorating conundrum can draw upon his 30+ years of experience. Do these efforts bring in business? "No," Wolf says flatly. "That's what a beautifully designed Web site does." Instead, he sees his posts about product-design copyrights and the pros and cons of participating in a show house as "giving back, a way of having a public dialogue" in the notoriously tight-lipped interior-design industry. Judging from the passionate comments the entries solicit, he's on to something. And while these efforts might not lead to immediate financial gain, they have cemented Wolf's position as an éminence grise in the field.

Staying connected to peers is especially important for those away

IF YOU'RE READY TO EMBRACE SOCIAL MEDIA, WHERE DO YOU START?

1. Determine your objectives.

"Do you want to generate sales leads, connect with other designers, or get published in the local press?" asks The Kaleidoscope Partnership's Leslie Carothers. For all of these aims, try LinkedIn, which also hosts forums for thousands of professional organizations, including IIDA. For media exposure, follow magazine editors on Twitter, as they often post calls for projects and competitions.

2. Consider ways to add to the conversation.

"You can write as well as share photos, videos, and links to interesting information," says Gensler's Carlos Martinez. Think about your communication style. Twitter and status updates on Facebook and LinkedIn entail brief comments, photos, or links, while the loquacious will prefer a blog format.

3. Be consistent.

"The worst thing is to begin [using social media] and then abandon it," says Carothers. "What kind of message does that send to potential clients?" For Twitter and Facebook users, she feels two posts a day—one in the morning and one in the evening—is enough to demonstrate your commitment.

4. Connect to your Web site.

"Social media's job is to bring people toward a company," says Adroyt's Rich Holschuh. "But once they get there, they have to have something substantial to bite into." A Web site with a cohesive brand presence and look is what ultimately sells your services.

from interior design's geographic epicenters. John Cantrell, an IIDA associate and LEED AP BD+C-certified designer in HOK's Atlanta office, turns to everything from blogs to virtual pinboard site Pinterest to keep up with design culture and "put myself out there verbally and visually."

But what if you don't have the time to tweet, blog, or post? You can hire a specialist to do it for you. "We can get you up and running on a full platform [of social-media options] in 30 days," says Saxon Henry, Adroyt's cofounder. She estimates costs in the "\$3,000 to \$10,000" range to craft a marketing plan and get you online; the fee includes a stockpile of posts and tweets. Monthly maintenance—a steady stream of content for your

channels, written in your voice—is also on offer for substantially less. Leslie Carothers, CEO of Minneapolis-based social-media marketing firm The Kaleidoscope Partnership, urges designers to keep several criteria in mind when selecting social-media gurus. "Do they have experience in the niche? Are they connected to the important people in the industry? Do they have any presence in social-media channels? How do they define successful results?" Carothers—whose accounts include furnishings line The New Traditionalists and contemporary-design trade show ICFF—adds that establishing and managing social-media campaigns full-time for a large firm can range from "\$100,000 to \$150,000 a year." Working for a single designer is

"nowhere near that," she says, although she declines to name specific figures.

For the profession, social media can be a powerful marketing tool with the ability to level the playing field—that is, if designers leverage its interactive and knowledge-sharing capabilities. But there are dues—in the form of time, persistence, sweat equity, or money. If you're ready to take the plunge, start with one platform. Keep your voice authentic, contribute as well as take, and be consistent; do these and you will connect with others and build your online presence. After all, says Holschuh: "Social media is word-of-mouth. It's people talking. If you're not there, they're not talking about you." ☐