

# Not just for teenagers

**Melita Thomas** explores the benefits and drawbacks of using sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to communicate with building occupants, share knowledge and develop relationships with industry contacts.

**S**ocial networking sites are all the rage – we are twittering, facebooking and linking in; blogging, myspacing and building “whuffie” – the current term for one’s personal, social capital (that is, the number of friends you have on Facebook). Is this all a flash in the pan and a fad for those of us who miss our teenage years, or are there real benefits to be gained?

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and Remit Consulting recently published a paper entitled *The Role of Social Media in Commercial Property*, which looks at the subject in the round and explains some background, but this article aims to look at its relevance to facilities managers. There are positive uses for social media and some pitfalls of which employers need to be aware.

## THE BENEFITS

First, the good side – using social media positively to improve standards and service delivery.

### Relationship building with customers

A few years ago, British Land and Broadgate Estates developed a useful community tool called Vicinitee, which gave building occupiers up-to-date information about their site; local traffic and transport news; special offers in shops; tools to report FM problems and track resolution progress; and information about fellow occupiers. On leaving, many occupiers were keen to take the service with them to new premises but, of course, Broadgate wanted to keep its unique offer.

This type of facility can now very easily be replicated, at least in part, by using sites such as Facebook, with the additional benefit that content can be added by many different users. By soliciting and monitoring customer feedback and understanding what is currently of interest or concern to occupiers, facilities and building managers can improve their service delivery. This type of media can also be a fertile source for identifying end users’ needs – the shopping public in a retail environment or office workers in commercial buildings.

Landlords are using Facebook effectively in shopping centres to communicate with shoppers both to promote centres in marketing campaigns and to gain feedback on the quality of shoppers’ experience. If you discover from end users that the third-floor lavatories are constantly being criticised for their design and cleanliness, that will help you monitor your service providers more effectively and to improve the design in future developments.

A current example of social networking is the Beach Student Accommodation Fund, which uses a Facebook group to communicate with its tenants and respond to issues raised. It permits managers to monitor heating and water issues, lift problems and so on, and even manage lettings, as the target tenants tend to be Facebook users.

### Broadcasting swiftly to many recipients

As well as this ongoing communication between users and managers, new media such as Twitter can be used for quick, day-to-day broadcasting of information. Take the example of a logged call from an office user that there has been a spillage of a hazardous substance on an office staircase. By sending a message (a “tweet”) to “followers” (effectively a self-selecting distribution list) on Twitter (or a closed corporate tool such as Ning or Yammer), the FM team can inform other building users in a message of up to 140 characters that the staircase is closed and, of course, when the problem has been dealt with, that it has reopened. This is a very minor example, but the point is that unlimited numbers of people can be informed of a fact in a short message that does not require anyone to log on to a system or to type in a list of names. Further, the original caller can be informed quickly that the problem is resolved, again without the bother of logging into a system to track that call.

### Training and professional development

Readers may remember the John Cleese management-training videos of the 1980s, broadcast by HR departments to groups of bored junior managers who promptly forgot them. Today’s answer to training and professional development is very much more dynamic and useful. Workplace TV is a website where conference speeches, training sessions and trend updates from major businesses across the globe are available. There are channels devoted to subjects such as the workplace, leadership and sustainability, which cover all manner of useful information. At the time of writing, there were clips from Peter Cordy, immediate past chairman of the British Institute of Facilities Management (BIFM), from the BIFM magazine, *FM World*, and from specialists on FM in educational-building design. This material can be made available to your team individually for them to review at leisure or in group sessions. There is also *Property Week TV*, which concentrates on UK property issues.

## DEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media may be defined as web-based tools that allow people to interact almost instantaneously, using different communication methods such as voice, text, photos or video. Importantly, social media are easily available via mobile phone and other handheld devices, obviating the need to log in to a computer. Social networking is a subset of social media that concentrates on building networks of friends or contacts.

### Crowdsourcing

This term is based on the old idea of “the wisdom of crowds”: if a large number of people are asked a question, their collective answer will be right – the “ask the audience” option on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. At the moment, if we have a problem to which we want to know the answer, we may email a few people, ask at the coffee machine or “google”. Obviously, the more people you ask, the better the chance of finding the correct answer. By using social networking tools, you can instantly ask a huge audience.

This concept is being effectively used by Prefio, a new recruitment site for the property which uses a network of senior professionals to find suitable candidates for vacancies. If you are a member, you are financially rewarded for identifying and passing on the name of the successful candidate. Clearly, the recruitment company can reach many more people in this way than by using the traditional telephone method and thus has a better chance of finding the right person.

### Internal knowledge databases or “wikis”

The simple technology behind the well-known online encyclopaedia Wikipedia can be adapted to internal company use to share information about a building. Each building can have a wiki entry, where a long-term history of events and issues can be recorded. This enables the capture of information over a long period and prevents the loss of the small pieces of information that give colour and context to managing an asset that comes when people leave, retire or change jobs.

### Image sharing

It is now easy to make a building inspection, taking pictures or videos with a mobile phone and uploading them to an image-sharing site such as Flickr or YouTube to be shared with colleagues and clients.

### Networking

It is part of the job of all property and facilities managers to build networks of contacts across the industry, be aware of changes in the market and maintain long-term relationships with colleagues and suppliers. Sites such as LinkedIn and Plaxo are ideal for this type of relationship building and for participating in special-interest groups. Creopoint is an example of a site dedicated to building real-estate communities across the globe to share information and best practice, although it is still heavily biased towards the US.

### PITFALLS

As can be seen, the benefits and uses of social media are many and varied, but there are some pitfalls which need to be understood and avoided. Much social networking is essentially about the individual, and many people use it to build their personal “brand” at the possible expense of that of the company. You need to ensure that you understand the risks and that you have a clear policy for employees on the use of social media, not only in work time but also covering what

they may say about their role within the company out of office hours.

### Legal issues

This article does not offer any legal advice and you should check with your advisers, but key points to consider when using sites or allowing your employees to do so are:

- social networking sites require a separate commercial agreement to be made with the provider to permit commercial use;
- the sites retain copyright on all published material, which they can alter or disseminate without consent from the original provider;
- if employees use social networking sites to download pirated material, employers may be liable;
- employers may be liable for misbehaviour by their employees in regard to breach of confidence or privacy, infringement of intellectual property, defamation, discrimination, harassment, publication of obscene material and so on. It is therefore essential to have a clear social-media policy as part of the employment contract; and
- any kind of “stealth advertising”, such as writing a review of your services purporting to be from a customer or paying someone to write a positive review (known as a “flog”), is illegal under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Act 2008.

### Reputational and brand risk

Is your team’s networking, blogging and tweeting enhancing your organisation’s reputation or are disaffected employees leaking confidential information, promoting negative views of the business and potentially damaging you? Your brand, which you may have expended huge resources developing and marketing, is now in the hands of not only your employees but every disaffected customer or troublemaker who has ever come in contact with you.

You need to monitor what people are saying about you. Not in the spirit of Big Brother – people are entitled to their opinions and their privacy – but to understand and counteract any information that may be false or prejudicial. Suppose you have a problem with *Legionella* or another health hazard and this information is spread around on the internet. You can’t deny its truth but you can take steps to disseminate information about the containment of the problem and to make clear that you now have a clean bill of health. Were you unaware of the original spread of the story, you could not counteract it.

### A GROWING PHENOMENON

This is a brief overview of social media’s relevance to us all. The phenomenon is a rapidly changing part of the business world and 2010 will assuredly see new developments in every aspect of it. You need to understand different forms of social media, be aware of how your team are using them and think laterally about how your business can use them to improve the service you offer to your clients and end users. **FM**

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### INFORMATION

*The Role of Social Media in Commercial Property is available at bit.ly/4XA0r9.*