

Business by



the (Face)Book

Social media is growing up, and area entrepreneurs are developing the next generation of tools to help businesses succeed in a Web 2.0 world.

When U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Thad W. Allen wanted to get word out to his staff about social media, he didn't circulate a memo or fire off an e-mail.

Instead, he went on YouTube, the video-sharing Web site better known for user-submitted videos of frolicking cats than executive proclamations. Decked out in full uniform, Allen called social media "a revolution in how we deal with information management."

"Meetings and clubs are being replaced by online chat rooms, groups that aggregate in Facebook, and other applications, and people interact in a much different way. We need to understand that's what our people do, and that's what the public we serve does as well," Allen says. "For that reason, it's critically important that senior leaders understand ... how [technology] is changing, and how we must change with it."

And change it has. Call it social media, social networking, or the overused moniker "Web 2.0," sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Flickr that allow users to connect and share information of all sorts have gone mainstream. You're now just as likely to find your boss as your old high school buddies on Facebook, and it's been speculated that more people watched Saturday Night Live's election-season parodies on video-sharing sites than on television. But social networking is also evolving into a medium offering serious business opportunities.

"People are just discovering how to leverage social networking in a meaningful way," says Jeff White, co-founder of mySBX (www.mySBX.com), a social networking site geared towards small businesses and government contractors. "Now that people are becoming comfortable with it as a tool for

by Mark Toner

Photographs by David Kidd

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collaboration and communication, the next wave will be business collaboration that actually involves meaningful transactions.”

Northern Virginia entrepreneurs are developing social media applications that promise just that, by breaking the barriers that keep small companies from landing federal contracts and prevent larger ones from innovating. Other companies focus on tools that allow conversations to flourish both inside and outside organizations, and even the government's most critical national-intelligence agencies are deploying the technology to share their most sensitive secrets.

Sharing secrets? Welcome to the brave new world of social media in the workplace.

It was no secret how White and NVTB Board member Brad Schwartz came to realize there had to be a better way for businesses to find partners to work on common projects, and particularly federal contracts.

“We've lived this pain,” says White. “Large integrators struggle to find small businesses to fulfill the demands of the contract, and small businesses look for ways to make those connections. It's usually done through haphazard relationships—at golf courses and events. We're trying to pull friction out of the dynamic.”

This summer, the two veterans of Reston-based Blue Canopy launched mySBX, a social-networking site targeted at government contractors and other businesses. The free site allows companies to share information about opportunities and will ultimately allow them to search for potential business partners based on a wide range of criteria—say, a woman-owned small business that can subcontract Oracle database administrators with security clearances. Other resource-sharing opportunities revolve around training and even unused physical assets like desks and projectors. Largely by word-of-mouth, more than 500 companies are now part of the network, which has also landed a sponsorship agreement with Deltek.

The goal is to help companies “overcome the efficiencies of being small by creating a community that is large in reach,” says Schwartz, co-founder of mySBX and president and CEO of Blue Canopy. “If

you take 1,000 companies with 30 employees each, that's 30,000 employees—the equivalent of Booz Allen and Bearing Point put together,” White adds.

With its alphabet soup of agencies with overlapping roles, the federal government has massive needs around collaboration. That's particularly true in the intelligence community, which by the nature of its mission has long favored compartmentalized information. But a new social media site being developed by the CIA and other agencies is sharing information gathered by “human intelligence sources,” who typically go by a less euphemistic name.

“Literally, it is Facebook for spies,” says Mark Drapeau, an associate research fellow focusing on social media and security issues at the federal National Defense University in Washington, D.C.

Launched earlier this fall, A-Space will ultimately allow CIA analysts (they represent the “A” in the site's name) to receive instant status updates and videos, audio and photos from individual users on the classified network—in other words, they'll “friend” their favorite spies. It's a standalone, highly classified iteration of INTELINK, a broader—but still secure—government network linking intelligence, diplomatic and law-enforcement agencies with video- and document-sharing tools, online-chat applications, and Intellipedia, a wiki-like reference guide that can be edited by users to reflect the realities of the fast-changing intelligence world. The goal? “To increase collaboration and analytical thinking,” according to Drapeau.

But collaboration has an equally strong role beyond the shadowy world of espionage. Companies large and small have long struggled to find ways to capture and evaluate new ideas and business opportunities, which are as likely to come from someone on the front line as in the front office.

“In a middle-sized company, when you have a good idea, what do you do? You go down the hall and start to talk to Joe. Then the two of you start talking to someone else,” says Rich Wolford, managing director of Growth Catalyst, a Springfield-based consultancy. “That's a good thing, but it's difficult to manage. Really good ideas can die an early death—they require adult supervision. Social net-



Jeff White, left, and Brad Schwartz are the co-founders of mySBX.

working allows you to formalize that process.”

In November, Wolford will launch Innovation Engine, an on-line collaboration tool designed to help companies nurture good ideas—and weed out bad ones. What makes the product work, he argues, is the way it applies structure to an otherwise amorphous process. Employees submitting ideas answer a series of questions addressing concrete issues such as costs and potential revenue. Coworkers who find the proposal compelling post online reactions for a set period of time, after which the original poster goes back and recalibrates the proposal based on the feedback. “It’s driving towards something instead of being a free-form discussion,” Wolford explains. “The goal is to strengthen the idea or reject it.”

Companies beta-testing the product have largely focused on “new products and markets,” Wolford says. The biggest surprise? Many proposals are squelched during the evaluation process. “Not everyone realizes that’s great. If you have 10 ideas and two really strong ones, [eliminating the others] means there’s a much better chance of having those two proceed.”

Sharing ideas is also the driving force behind GovLoop (www.govloop.com), a social-networking site for government employees. “There are no mechanisms to share best practices and connect across agencies,” says Steve Ressler, a Florida-based Department of Homeland Security employee who launched the site this summer.

GovLoop’s growth reflects an evolution across the broader spectrum of social media tools. A twentysomething employee new to government, Ressler formed a real-world group called Young Government Leaders. It eventually grew to 2,000 members across the United States, with local chapters sponsoring face-to-face social events and professional development. Ressler then created a discussion group for the organization’s members on LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), a social networking site targeted at business users. But the discussion tools were too limited and the site’s audience too broad, so he then built and launched GovLoop.

“As the tools have evolved, you’re seeing niche social networks for everything you want to do,” Ressler says. “People balance multiple identities on sites like Facebook—father, worker, fraternity member. If you come to GovLoop, you’re wearing that one hat and having that discussion.”

What GovLoop, Innovation Engine and A-Space have in common is that they all break down organizational barriers. They all are unlikely to be used by employees, however, in the absence of a compelling reason to do so. “Social media is viral by nature,” Ressler says. “If a site doesn’t add value, people won’t go.”

The federal government has a full-time evangelist who promotes A-Space and INTELINK to potential users. For a corporate tool like Innovation Engine, Wolford suggests that companies provide

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incentives, such as bonuses or time off, to reward users who frequently participate or provide feedback on others' suggestions.

"It's a big challenge to introduce tools that essentially go around the org chart," Drapeau says. "That's true in large businesses, and extremely true in government."

Instant messages now seemingly shoot out of the ether from everywhere—computers, cell phones, pagers. But this June, an IM came from a highly unlikely source.

"We have ICE!" the Phoenix lander announced from the surface of Mars via Twitter, an instant-messaging service more commonly used by smartphone users than interplanetary travelers. Like NASA, more and more companies are using instant messaging and similar two-way communication tools to grab the attention of employees and customers alike.

Dulles-based AOL has arguably the world's largest collaboration tool in its AIM instant-messaging service, which claims more than 60 million users worldwide. As with other social media tools, AOL has now developed a buttoned-down business counterpart, in the form of an enterprise solution it sells to businesses. With their need to share information instantly, banks and investment firms are among clients using the technology, which has attracted rivals in the enterprise space such as Cisco, which acquired the Jabber

instant-messaging service.

"It's an asynchronous communication tool—at the time you have that thought, you're reaching out," says David Liu, AOL's senior vice president and general manager of People Networks, which oversees AOL's other social media tools, including ICQ, Bebo, Goowy, Yedda and Socialthing! "At first, it can be jarring. Then people begin to multitask and hold five conversations at once... and for the most part, they can't imagine life without it."

AOL is also preparing to launch a site-based version of AIM, which will allow companies to integrate the instant-messaging system into their own Web sites to communicate with customers. "A lot of online businesses want their users to be able to engage and communicate with each other," Liu says. "Whether they like it or not, they're a community, and they can foster that community."

The challenge for most organizations is remembering that such tools—like blogs, Facebook pages and just about anything else with the words "Web 2.0" in its name—require two-way communication. Drapeau studied 75 government-related Twitter accounts, and found that only one-third were connected to a specific person who responded to comments. The others are just "pushing messages and masquerading as Web 2.0 sites with the same old mentality," he says. "That doesn't work. It's now a conversation. It's not hiding from the conversation that's going on anyway—it's engaging and listening. It's about reading the comments on a blog and changing your policies because you got new ideas."

For businesses in Northern Virginia and beyond, the need to share ideas will grow, particularly as the number of small firms and self-employed consultants continues to explode. "They will be motivated to connect to get things done," Schwartz says. "We're going to see a whole series of business models and activities that can accelerate how they perform." Just as importantly, "your competitors will out-compete you if they're using these things," Drapeau adds.

As for Allen, the YouTube star of the Coast Guard scene? He's also got a blog, posts photos to Flickr, and responds to comments on his personal Facebook "wall." But as Drapeau warns, the Web 2.0 crowd expects you to keep up with them. "Don't forget about Twitter," reads one comment. **nvtc**

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