

News

Popular social networking tools untapped by most area schools

Sunday, September 6, 2009

By Sandra M. Klepach
SKlepach@News-Herald.com

"It's sort of coming at school districts like a freight train."

Her laughter exudes confidence, not nerves.

Speaking for the area's only tweeting school district, Ellen Ondrey works comfortably ahead of the impact.

She's a regular on the social networking site Twitter.com — posting almost daily, in 140-character spurts, on behalf of Chardon Schools.

Friday's tweet proved how capable the school district spokeswoman has become.

"Reminder: No classes in Chardon tomorrow, It's our Geauga County Fair Day. Best wishes to all of our hard working 4-H families!"

That's 13 characters short of the limit and suitable for "retweeting," another instantaneous way Twitter helps her spread the word.

Schools are finally discussing how to use online opportunities for social mingling — mostly Twitter and Facebook, considered more professional than MySpace — to reach audiences not otherwise visiting their districts' official Web sites.

Those range from students to parents to former band and drama club members to alumni in other states, all getting direct, easily accessible, easily shareable updates about sporting events, meetings, photos, open houses, reunions and so on.

Many students already have one or more social networking account. Facebook claims more than 60 million active users, growing an average 3 percent weekly. A total number of Twitter users hasn't been released, but businesses are now more widely joining individuals in the grab for free communication and publicity.

Ondrey is also building a Facebook page for Chardon, but she chose Twitter first. The account she easily created, ChardonSchools, had 50 followers within weeks and accrues a couple of new users each day.

Trend-following can get sticky for school districts already strapped for funds and man hours. But social networking engages the community instead of "pushing information out," said Ondrey, who sits on the board of the Ohio chapter of the National School Public Relations Association.

"It's just another way to stay connected, and I just don't think it's something to be afraid of," she said. "There's a way, if you do your homework and understand the parameters of the new tools, you can use them effectively."

Linking legally

First, school districts must consider legal ramifications, including First Amendment rights, said Eric Johnson, a partner, founder and head of the Education Law Group at Walter & Haverfield in Cleveland. Johnson has worked with Fairport Harbor, Mentor and Kirtland school districts, but not in the realm of social networking policy until Ondrey approached him.

As a public entity, a school district could face trouble if it removes criticism of itself from its site, Johnson said.

"It's somewhat like the public portion at a board meeting; once you've opened up public form, you can't then discriminate against other viewpoints except for hate speech, threats, profanity or things like that," he said. "That's not to say it can't be done."

Facebook offers certain options to block commenting capabilities, and Twitter doesn't allow comments directly to another person's page.

Johnson encourages districts to at least look at the sites.

"There's a population now that lives off the Internet and lives off technology and lives off that instantaneous 'hit' of information," he said. "So I think at least consider looking at these options — especially as difficult as it's become to pass levies, or just general community. Just educate personnel and students as to the risks and what could go wrong.

"Proceed deliberately and with a lot of thought and consideration of the practical, the operational, the economical and then the legal. There are so many ways to use it for evil, why not use it for good?"

For good over evil

Twitter arrived at Fairport Harbor's McKinley Elementary last month with its new principal, Kevin Guynn.

"I'm just beginning — this is part of lifelong learning," said Guynn, whose account is DrGuynn. "I've invited parents to sign up to be followers, and I'd love to follow their ideas."

Superintendent Domenic Paolo applauded the pilot, though hesitates to expand to higher grades, who "know that landscape better than we do."

A pilot at Cardinal Middle School, however, has students all atwitter.

Text boxes on CMSHotSpot.com, one for each grade, scroll daily homework assignments. "History 8 HW - None for the long weekend. Enjoy the fair!" CMS8thGrade scrolled Friday.

Principal Jim Millet started a Twitter pilot last month while doing doctorate research on digital communication tools and their effectiveness in schools. Teachers there tweet homework assignments — a backup to the daily planner — discussion topics, links for further learning and other 140-character notes.

"Let's say a teacher wants students to be able to link to a history page," Millet said. "Now we've extended the learning day from just 7 to 8 hours to a possible 13, 14 hours they could be communicating or getting information from a teacher."

Students can check Twitter on the library and mobile lab computers during school. Afterward, many of their cell phones and iPod Touches can access the page, as well as some gaming systems.

"We're taking advantage of a tool they're using in their lifestyles anyway and giving them an opportunity to use it in a productive way to organize their lives."

Eighth-grader Josh Brown, 14, already followed his favorite music artists on Twitter, but now he also uses it as a reminder of which books he needs to bring home.

"(Tuesday) I had to run back and get my history book so I didn't mess up in Mr. Kruse's class," he said. "When I checked my page last night I saw that three of my friends had just signed up and added CMSSpot on their Twitter."

One of those, classmate Tyler Kish, 13, instantly saw a tweet announcing a teacher's projector grant.

"I think maybe kids will get better grades from checking it for homework," Tyler said. "It hasn't saved me yet but it probably will."

Decisions, decisions

So who's next?

"There's a lot of variables to consider," Kirtland Superintendent Stan Lipinski said. "People's right to use technology but the privacy of others — this will take a little bit of time to be thorough rather than reactionary."

First district leaders must decide whether they'd like to use them at all, and many still haven't even had that discussion. Typical technology policies still focus more on whether students can access social networking sites from school — usually not, blocked by an element of their computer systems called a firewall — and punishments if pictures of underage drinking turn up.

Johnson said districts can't ban students or staff members from having personal pages, but many offer advice on posting certain information and pictures. Students often search the sites for their teachers' names, he said.

"This could go back 10 years when you were back in college, Halloween night at Ohio University, and now little Johnny in the front row sees it," Johnson said. "That's going to have an impact on how you're trying to teach these kids. You're never going to live it down."

For starters, Berkshire School Board soon will prohibit staff from requiring students to visit their personal page for grades or assignments, Superintendent Doug DeLong said.

Auburn Career Center already has two official Facebook pages, but neither has more than two "fans" so far.

Madison School Board President Jacqueline Azbill reluctantly uses her personal page to keep up with more than 100 community members while developing a formal Facebook page for Madison Schools.

"I'm excited about the potential," she said.

But most academic attitudes simply haven't shifted to embrace social networking — yet, South Euclid-Lyndhurst Superintendent William Zelei said.

"While some staff have begun using text messages to communicate with students, such is very rare and the exception, although I believe that the use of digital communication and social media sites might become a movement of the future," Zelei

said.

The ins and outs

Social networking sites allow users to link their accounts together and follow and communicate with each other.

Founded in 2004, Facebook offers communication tools such as status messages, comments, blogs and photo albums. Two years later, Twitter began allowing users to only post bursts of text up to 140 characters in length, using codes to interconnect their messages. "Tweets" may include shortened links to other sites — but all must stay within that brief character limit.

Unlike Facebook, Twitter doesn't demand the "friendship" be reciprocal; Joe can follow Sue, but Sue need not follow Joe.

On Twitter, adding certain abbreviations or codes to your text can extend its meaning.

SYSTEM FUNCTIONS

@ — To reply to a poster by sending a tweet to his or her page

i.e. @ChardonSchools

— To designate topics that people might search for, to allow for quicker searches to your topic, i.e. #swineflu, or to designate a keyword for a search

i.e. #Julia26 to discuss Julia's 26th birthday party in May

SLANG

RT @ — To "retweet" another's message so your own followers can see it

i.e. RT @ChardonSchools "Check out these great pics from our 'Meet the Topper's' event at <http://tiny.cc/x0jn5>"

HT: — To "hear through" someone

i.e. HT: @ChardonSchools that the school has a tent at the Great Geauga County Fair

i.e. HT: Jane in advertising that we'll all get raises

OH: — To "overhear" without revealing the original author

i.e. OH: "I'm still afraid of monsters under the bed"

EXAMPLES OF SCHOOLS USING TWITTER

Cardinal: www.cmshotspot.com

Chardon: www.twitter.com/ChardonSchools

Fairport Harbor: www.twitter.com/DrGuynn

URL: <http://www.news-herald.com/articles/2009/09/06/news/nh1380365.prt>

© 2009 news-herald.com, a **Journal Register** Property

This article appeared in the September 6, 2009 issue (print and on-line versions) of *The News-Herald*, and has been reprinted with the newspaper's permission.