

Eagan

Business News

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Briefly: Eagan businesses in the news



Did you know...?

- Half of the 10 most popular Twitter sites in Eagan belong to businesses: West LegalEdcenter, White House Custom Colour, Westblog (A Thomson Reuters business), Construct Zero and Nardi Photography.
- You can get your consumer-focused Tweets included on cheaptweet.com—"scouring Twitter for deals so you don't have to." Visit cheaptweet.com for more information.
- You can keep up to date on Eagan happenings on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr, thanks to the Eagan Convention and Visitors Bureau at www.eaganmn.com.
- You can keep abreast of Eagan business happenings on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter (twitter.com/DCRChamber), courtesy of the Dakota County Chamber of Commerce.

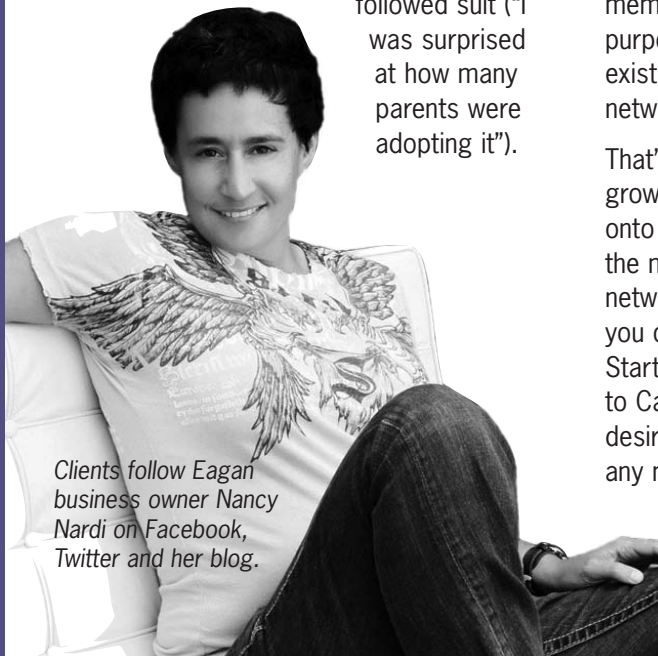
Leveraging social media

Local businesses share their online lessons

Long, long ago, way back in 2007, college students still claimed Facebook mostly as their own, business owners were just beginning to understand LinkedIn and practically no one had sent a Tweet, let alone heard of Twitter. But Eagan business owner **Nancy Nardi** was already in the thick of social media.

"Social media is my number-one way of generating clients," says the Eagan native and professional photographer who specializes in senior high school portraits. "Clients show off their photos and, right away, I hear from their friends. It's a naturally viral product."

Nardi followed her various client groups to their social media of choice. "I started asking my audience where they would like to see their photos," she says. Not surprisingly, high school students gravitated to her Facebook page and their parents quickly followed suit ("I was surprised at how many parents were adopting it").



Clients follow Eagan business owner Nancy Nardi on Facebook, Twitter and her blog.

Meanwhile, colleagues, along with some of the parents, read her blog. Since then she's launched a Twitter account, and her website remains a source of business information and a photography showcase.

So successful has been Nardi's multi-pronged approach to social media that she was invited to give a keynote address on marketing to a national conference of photographers. "Social media is really intimidating to a lot of people who aren't Internet savvy," explains Nardi, who offered a bevy of tips at the event. Her takeaway? Lots of new Facebook, Twitter and blog followers.

But is social media a savvy choice for your business? That's the question more and more businesses are asking themselves. Worldwide, Facebook passed the 250-million-member mark in July, and no doubt, a meaningful percentage of those members use their pages for business purposes, believing fewer distinctions exist anymore between social and business networking.

That's true in Eagan as well, where a growing number of businesses are logging onto Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the many other niche business-oriented networking sites, from Ning.com, which lets you create your own social networks (i.e., StartUp, for small business entrepreneurs), to Care2.com, which assists professionals desiring to make a difference through any number of causes. Moreover, these challenging economic times may be spurring social media's growth: Social networking apps are

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generally free, costing just the time and employee power to create and update profiles and information.

Anne Kelly (below) has jumped full force into social media to reach her customers. The founder of Junonia has grown her company over the past 10 years, spending seven years in Eagan, to become the leading retailer of high-quality, plus-size active wear for women. While financials aren't public, Kelly will say that sales top \$10 million annually.



Today, Junonia customers place their orders via phone or online, but they can also read about plus-size clothing on the company's blog and follow the company on Twitter, Facebook and MySpace. That's by design, says Kelly, whose strong belief in open communications led her to feature her photo and phone number on the company's home page.

"The Internet has changed things dramatically," she says. "For a niche marketer like myself, we're more and more dependent on direct sales means." In the past that meant a printed catalog; today that catalog is part of an overall web strategy, serving primarily as a reminder to customers of Junonia's existence. Meanwhile, even an online presence is growing pricey. "Google ad words are expensive," she says. "That's one reason my company is looking to social media."

While Junonia has discovered that MySpace draws an

audience generally too young for its target clientele (women ages 35-55) and is experimenting with coupon codes exclusive to its Twitter account, the company is experiencing success with Facebook and blogger.com. A search, says Kelly, can lead readers to her blog, which then directs them to the company Web site.

"Social media is moving so fast; no one has any firm answers," she says, adding that "you have to be careful and look at the potential of each platform. You could go spinning off when the market is not there."

Kelly does, however, note that there are rules for social media participation, including offering information of value to customers, regularly maintaining your business presence whatever apps you use and providing contact with customers. "Every type of social media has a certain nature, and you have to respect that nature," she says, adding that if you don't, you'll get "kicked out of the sandbox."

Just this summer after an excellent first-day opening of the movie "Bruno," second-day sales sunk dramatically—likely, say media watchers, after moviegoers Twittered friends to alert them of the movie's bomb status. It seemed no amount of pre-release advertising could counter the power of one evening of Twittering. Like Nardi noted, social media is a naturally viral product — for good or for bad business outcomes.

"A company like us produces good clothing that lasts," Kelly says. "So I'm not afraid of social media. But a company that tries to pull the wool over customers' eyes is not going to be happy with social media." ■

Climbing aboard the social media bandwagon? Read these tips first

Considering social media for your business? Two pros, Amanda Franklin, Director of Community Affairs at the Dakota County Chamber of Commerce, and Mike Peterson, Marketing Assistant at the Eagan Convention and Visitors Bureau, offer getting-started tips.

1. Consider the nature of your business, your target audience and the appeal of various social media. For example, if your clients are businesses, select a business-focused networking tool. If your customers are consumers, adopt Facebook. Most important, ask your customers: "What social media do you use?"

2. Offer value. "Make it worthwhile for customers to visit your page," says Peterson, suggesting that a page of deals exclusive to Facebook friends or Twitter followers is a perfect way to go. "Post personal nonsense and your customers will stop following you."

3. Focus on one core message and stick to it with calls to action. That's especially the case with Twitter, which only allows 140 characters per tweet. Regardless of your app, Peterson says, "keep your message as simple as possible."

4. Be consistent. Post new information regularly, whether once a day or once a week. "Interact with your customers as much as

possible," he says. "High response levels promote your brand."

5. Consider social media's cautionary tales. Don't share too much personal information, and check sites daily to scrub posts unrelated to business. That said, Peterson notes that the bureau has never experienced a problematic post.

6. Be brave. "Give it a whirl and see what happens—experiment," Franklin advises. Peterson agrees: "Get past entering your name and information, and start sending messages. Soon you'll find yourself creating your message and your brand, and it will get easier."

7. Double up—if you have time and it makes business sense. Not everyone is on Facebook, and not everyone is on Twitter. By developing a solid presence on a couple of sites, you'll reach a wider audience. ■



Good news for corporate givers

Seven clever ways to support our community

Back in July, a single father visited the Eagan Resource Center, Dakota County's largest food shelf, where frequent volunteer **Karen Kitchel** was working.

"It was the first time he'd ever walked through the door," says Kitchel. "And he was happy to get boxes of macaroni-and-cheese for his children, but he left with a huge smile, because we gave him a present he could give to his son on his birthday."

Their meeting was serendipitous:

Kitchel is also president of Cheerful Givers, the Eagan-based nonprofit that supplied the food shelf with the gift bag of small toys.

Unfortunately, that father is just one of thousands of Twin Citians who have suddenly found themselves in dire financial straits. Just last month, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* printed a startling statistic: the percentage of people living in transitional or emergency housing in Dakota County has jumped 38 percent since 2007. Compounding that problem is the fact that generous foundations and businesses may not be able to dig so deep in 2009.

"We've seen a growing need this year," Kitchel says, "because there are more



Thomson Reuters employees fill gift bags for Cheerful Givers.

families living in poverty. Yet it's really difficult because donations have decreased."

Fortunately, both she and **Jan Bellmore**, executive director of Kids 'n Kinship, a local mentoring program, say there are lots of easy and affordable ways—in addition or in lieu of writing a check—that businesses can support worthwhile nonprofits.

"Giving is such a win-win," says Bellmore. "A company builds its reputation in the community as a business that gets involved and cares, while the people who benefit are going to one day be their employees or their customers. So it really behooves a business to invest in the community."

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Basic Needs Campaign gets started

Thomson Reuters made news this summer when the company announced a gift of \$125,000 to Second Harvest Heartland, the first gift of the firm's new Basic Needs Campaign that "provides financial, in-kind, and volunteer support to help address growing basic needs"—in other words, the food, housing and support that people need to exist every day.

"We want to help better the communities in which our employees live and work," says **Martha Fields**, manager of Community Relations. Noting today's severe economic environment, she says, "From a business perspective, it is our responsibility. This is not the time to walk away from our commitments."

Thomson Reuters employees too are invited to get involved in their communities, often volunteering at partner organizations, including Second Harvest Heartland. ■

Briefly

- **Champ Engineering** will be featured on Heartbeat of America, hosted by William Shatner on the American Life Television Network. The Eagan firm provides automation engineering and automated machine development for North American manufacturers.

- **ORBIT Systems** has been named to the 2009 Inc. 5000 List for the third year. The Eagan-based company was selected based on its remarkable growth; the company provides fully managed computer environments for small and mid-sized Twin Cities companies.

- **Leo Brisbois**, an Eagan resident and attorney with the Minneapolis law firm of Stich, Angell, Kreidler & Dodge, was elected president of the Minnesota State Bar Association last month. He is the first person of known American Indian descent to be named to the post.

- **Skyline Exhibits**, a designer/builder of custom modular exhibits and trade show displays, won the 2009 TSEA Exhibitors Choice Award Favorite Exhibit House Award, Honorable Mention, last month. Earlier this year, the Eagan company won the Buyers Choice Award at Exhibitor 2009.

- **Biotel** may take legal action against CardioNet after the Pennsylvania company cancelled its acquisition of the Eagan firm. Biotel's president and CEO Steve Springrose disagreed with CardioNet's statement that Biotel had not complied agreement terms.

- Eagan-based **Gearworks** has been sold to Xora, a California firm, for an undisclosed amount in mid-August; both companies specialize in location-based mobile business applications. Most Minnesota staffers will keep their positions.

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Editor Karin B. Miller, Working Words, Inc.
Designer Brent Kastler, Kastler Art & Design

Send comments and story ideas to
EBN@cityofeagan.com.

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Listed below are Kitchel's and Bellmore's clever suggestions that cost little but make a big impact.

1. Tap your business assets. Nonprofits are often in need of assistance with payroll, printing or even just a free meeting space. "That kind of in-kind giving is a huge help for us," says Bellmore. "We can then devote more of our funds to our kids."

2. Invite a speaker. Nonprofits love to spread the word about their missions. Simply invite a speaker from a local organization to address your employees over the lunch hour; it's a simple and economical way to help out.

3. Encourage volunteering. Whether pitching in a few hours every year or serving on a nonprofit board, "volunteering helps people find meaning in their lives and maybe transition into new careers they never thought they might enjoy," says Bellmore.

4. Fundraise. Seek your employees' input to select a charity and then plan a fundraising event. Kitchel suggests three: bidding on lunch with your company president, holding an international potluck (employees bring dishes to share and pay an admission fee) and allowing a jeans day or dress-down day (employees pay a small fee to participate).

5. Throw a party. Through Cheerful Givers, a company can hold a 30-minute Birthday Bag Blitz—"a fun, team building event," says Kitchel—over a lunch hour, inviting employees to fill gift bags with birthday items that the company supplies or funds. Other nonprofits, such as Feed My Starving Children, also in Eagan, offer similar opportunities.

6. Hold a tried-and-true supply drive. The focus of your drive could be as simple as crayons or soup, or more elaborate, such as business attire and personal-care items for hopeful but down-on-their-luck job seekers.

7. Contact a nonprofit. No matter your business focus, there's a nonprofit whose mission you can support. Nonprofits are happy to work with businesses to figure out a way they can help. Says Kitchel: "We encourage companies to contact with us and we're glad to help them plan something." ■

Cheerful Givers (www.cheerfulgivers.org) provides toy-filled gift bags to food shelves and shelters so that parents living in poverty can give their children, ages 3-12 years old, birthday gifts.

Kids 'n Kinship (www.kidsnkinship.org) matches children in Eagan and other area communities who need an additional supportive relationship with carefully screened adult volunteers for weekly activities.