

Social Media - Not Just For Marketing Setting Up Your Personal Learning Network (PLN) By Christine Christman

For those of us who work in trade shows and events, the terms social media equates with marketing. We have this vague idea that perhaps we should be creating some sort of “personal brand” on social media and that LinkedIn is important, but why, really? Here’s why.

Professional Development. And I don’t mean networking. I mean sustained, ongoing skill development tightly focused to your on-the-job needs. There’s a word for what’s being expected of us in the workplace today: autodidact: a person who is self-educated.

If you work for a fairly good sized company you probably received some training for your job and still have access to a variety of resources for skill-building. But for the rest of us, those working in start-ups, smaller organizations, or creating our own start-ups, there is no corporate education center to tap into when we need something.

But the good news is, thanks to blogging and the new “content economy” there’s an enormous amount of information out there that’s cheap or free and, in fact, really helpful. Companies are creating it in order to get you to buy their products. Your company might be creating it, too. You might be creating it.

So, yes, no sugar coating it, this is another THING TO DO in your already overwhelming list of things to do. I won’t say “just 20 minutes a day” because I’ve come to hate that phrase. If I added up all of the things that I am supposed to spend just 20 minutes a day on it would probably take me a week to fit them all in. So, if you’re going to make it a priority you might have to adjust your schedule. Do something less frequently to fit this in, take something out all together. You’ll figure it out.

Now, I liken this a bit to thrift store shopping. You do have to go through some not so great stuff to find the treasures. But the process is, in fact, part of the education. If you follow these five steps, you’ll have set up a nice flow of information that you can dip into to find the resources you need when you need them.

Step one: Set up information inflow. Create a feed reader in the platform of your choice (I like Google, see google.reader.com and hootsuite.com for Twitter).

Step two: Set up your online file cabinet to store important information (I use Evernote. I used to use Google Bookmarks until I found Evernote which I like much better).

Step three: Set up your chosen social media accounts if you haven’t already (I use LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest. Yes, I still use email, too.)

Step four: Troll for info sources (LinkedIn Groups, topic blogs, industry blogs, online magazines, online communities, user group forums, see what I mean?) I don't even know how many sources I use any more. It keeps changing because I add and delete based on relevance.

Step five: Add the process to your flow (daily, weekly, monthly.) Scroll through your feed reader and don't get hung up if it starts to build up. Here's a little secret: sometimes when they build up I just go through and click "delete all" on each account. I figure it's a cosmic thing that I missed that part of the stream but if I missed something I really needed, it'll come back around somewhere else. I think the biggest mistake people make is thinking that they have to read it all. NO YOU DON'T. You'll only read 1-5% of it. But that's the key. You'll find the 1-5% that's relevant to you.

The best thing about this system is that it is fluid. You can instantly adapt it to meet current and existing needs. Is a new exhibit structure in the works for you? Use the system to learn about options, pricing, support and experience. Need to beef up your lead processing system? Learn about suppliers, technology and pricing. Want to get more involved in the industry? Learn about online groups or groups in your geographic area where you can get started.

Your PLN will never replace formal learning. There is always a place for attending that intensive live seminar or conference to launch you to the next level. But with a PLN you will also be able to keep innovating as you go.

Christine Christman has worked in the trade show industry since 1981. As the first staff writer for Exhibitor Magazine, she helped develop the research standards and editorial format that is still in use today. Christine has published hundreds of articles and three books on trade show marketing: *The Guide to Successful Trade Show Marketing*, a collection of articles published by Exhibitor Magazine; *The Guide to Successful Exhibiting*, a self-study course published by Skyline Displays; and *The Complete Handbook of Profitable Trade Show Exhibiting*, published by Prentice Hall.

Christine also worked as a consultant with Communique Exhibitor Education where she trained exhibit staff and wrote award-winning manuals for Fortune 500 Companies such as IBM, US West Communications, and Eli Lilly Pharmaceuticals. Christine helped to develop Exhibitor Show CTSM program and worked as its Executive Director until 10 years ago when she took a break from the industry to work on her MA in English. She recently returned to Exhibitor Media Group to help develop the Exhibitor eTrak online learning program. Christine's new online resource, "NowWhat? eGuide for Trade Show Exhibitors" is available at www.tradeshowexhibitor.net.