

Downtown Promotion Reporter

The tools you need to bring more people and business downtown



Communications & Media

Getting social gives downtown a personality and a voice

Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and blogging attract millions of users daily. Downtown organizations are using the constant-connectivity craze to educate the public about issues, create buzz about events, and to maintain a line of open communication with the public.

“At first, I thought this was just a shiny new toy everyone was talking about,” says Lisa Martinez, director of marketing and outreach at the Downtown Sacramento Partnership in Sacramento, CA (est. pop. 466,676). “I knew about social networking and had dabbled with it in my personal life, but I didn’t understand what it could do for businesses.”

Martinez attended a social media conference in 2008, where she met social media guru Alejandro Reyes. The DSP has been working with him ever since.

“Alejandro has helped us to understand how to use this best,” she says. “People think social media is a destination, but truly, it is a community. You can use that tool to extend your brand, engage customers or potential customers, and to really listen to the community around you. Once you understand your brand and your purpose for being online, social media is an invaluable tool. We are very active on Facebook and Twitter.”

Reaching out

At first, Martinez was skeptical that the DSP would benefit from social media.

“We are a property-based improvement district,” she says. “Why would anybody care about that? We found there was a great need. People

want to know what’s happening downtown, where to go. Twitter is a fantastic tool for getting the immediate response you’re looking for.”

The DSP tweets promote special events, support local businesses, discuss who’s new in the district, and provide information about what’s happening.

Tweeting boosts visibility and utilization of Downtown program

The Downtown Sacramento Partnership’s duties include keeping the area clean and safe. Community Service Guides, clad in bright yellow attire, provide customer service to downtown patrons and support law enforcement agencies, property owners and merchants in overall crime prevention. Guides provide directions, escort downtown employees and patrons, document graffiti, and deter public drinking and aggressive panhandling.

Recently, the guides went high-tech by joining Twitter (<http://twitter.com/DSPGuides>). This allows them to quickly communicate with each other, with other DSP departments and with the public. Downtown patrons can ask guides questions, or report issues such as graffiti.

Tweets in recent weeks have allowed guides to share the fact that they distributed over 100 flyers to merchants in Old Sac reminding them that streets would be closed for the St. Patrick’s Day Parade; warn commuters that a light rail ticket machine on K Street was out of order; assist a citizen with a parking meter issue; direct a lost motorist to the freeway; find the owner of a lost wallet; post teasers about specials at various downtown eateries; quickly communicate the description of a robbery suspect; and share an Amber Alert for an abducted boy.

To follow the Downtown Sacramento Partnership on Twitter, go to <http://twitter.com/downtownsac>.

Sometimes people just want to know what the scaffolding is for, why a street is closed, or where to have lunch. “Or we can use it to correct misinformation about a big development project,” Martinez says.

The DSP marketing manager, Megan Emmerling, also recommends being a resource by sharing articles and information of particular interest to known followers. “You can say, ‘Hey, so and so, did you see this article?’ and add a link to it, and if they find it interesting, they might share it with their followers. They appreciate you pointing out things interesting to them. It’s important not to use Twitter for pushing information or trying to broadcast, but use it to be more of a resource.”

Listening to the online community

“We are also using social media as a way to listen in on conversations and be able to respond to people,” says Martinez. Emmerling tracks tweets and responds when appropriate. “She is a responsive, pro-active, constant presence, and that’s what it takes. You don’t have to have a person who just does social media all day. Just do it daily for some amount of time.”

Emmerling says it’s important to follow people on Twitter who are very active in your community. “Listen to what they are tweeting about,” she says. “Often, especially if they are heavy Twitter users, active community members are already having a conversation with each other. Look for conversations you can join into. The nice thing about Twitter is that you can jump into any conversation and not be rude. Put your two cents worth in. Let them know additional information. Answer questions. It’s kind of like they put it out there to the universe, and you magically hear them, and then they see us as a resource.”

You can also find and follow conversations about the downtown area by using Twitter’s search features. For example, users may set up searches for key phrases, such as “Downtown Sacramento” and “DowntownSac,” to locate tweets about those topics. Or set up a “hash tag” by typing a tweet and including a key phrase with a number sign in front of it, such as #downtownsac. Then, when the tweet posts, click on the underlined key phrase to view a list of tweets about the topic. Reyes also recommends creating a hash tag before and after every event to gain access to everyone talking about that event. Searches and hash tags allow users to view, and respond to, tweets of individuals not on their “Follower” list.

Using all the tools in the toolbox

“Even before social media, our goal was to be an information source for downtown,” says Martinez. “Ultimately, our goal is that we want people to really understand who the Downtown Sacramento Partnership is, to dispel misconceptions about downtown, and for people to enjoy their time downtown, and feel it’s a place they want to be. If we listen to people, we learn quite a bit about what people want to hear about, and what people care about.”

Martinez says that even the most fantastic print or radio campaign is not running 24/7.

“With social media, you can continue the conversation,” she says. “We launched our blog about six months ago, and we’ve seen great traffic on it. We use it as a platform to talk about events and educate people.”

Social media has also changed the way the DSP treats some of their offline communications. Print newsletters weren’t fast enough to get information out in a timely manner, so the DSP has moved to a quarterly print newsletter.

“We’ve integrated a lot of the content on a weekly, and even daily, basis on the blog so our stakeholders can get the inside scoop,” she says. “Everything is connected, even our PR campaigns, when we do them. We share the same information on the blog, Twitter and Facebook.”

Sharing the wealth

“I talked to businesses about social media and they would say, ‘I know I have to but I don’t have the time,’ so we started a pilot with key marketing partners,” says Martinez. The program was so successful that the DSP has started quarterly social media workshops free to member businesses.

“The DSP recognized that this is where the community is headed, so they brought me in,” says Reyes, president of Sacramento Marketing Labs. “I’ve been doing webinars and seminars. This positions the DSP as a resource. There’s so much noise out there that people don’t really listen, but when you position your organization as a resource that adds value on a consistent basis, people start to pay attention.”

Martinez expected that only retail businesses and restaurants would jump on the social media

bandwagon, but says that other businesses have participated, as have potential new businesses.

“These workshops let us engage a little bit more deeply with them,” she says. Often, having come to see the DSP as a social media resource, a business will then ask for help on another front, she says. “This shows our value to our stakeholders. It helps us build one-on-one relationships with people and makes our stakeholders’ lives a little easier.”

Reyes says that one result of more connectivity online has been more collaboration between downtown businesses.

“It’s hard sometimes for an old-school, traditional business to want to collaborate because it wasn’t as common 20 years ago,” says Reyes. “You can speed up that process with sites like Facebook and Twitter. We’re seeing a lot of small businesses and restaurants collaborate. They may be competitors, but there’s a lot of buoyancy in cross-promoting each other.”

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