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**HEADLINE:** Social networking has become the new frontier for public relations.

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by Peterson, Eric ColoradoBiz . May, **2009** . Tweet ON THE Street

### SOCIAL-NETWORKING WORKSHOPS AND SEMINARS

For those who have yet to dip their toes in the ever-expanding social-networking waters, two Denver-based PR agencies, JohnstonWells and GroundFloor Media, are offering workshops in May to help people get started.

JohnstonWells' Lab 1321 starts with an hour of lecture and ends with an hour of lab. Social networking is one of four labs; participants set up profiles on a social-networking site and get started right then and there. Each two-hour lab runs \$45 per participant. The next social-networking lab is on May 6. [www.johnstonwells.com](http://www.johnstonwells.com)

### ILLUSTRATION OOMITTED

GroundFloor Media's Social Media 101 is a series of free half-day workshops to organizations working in education, nonprofit, health care and other areas. On May 19, the workshop is open to those working with cultural facilities. [www.groundfloormedia.com](http://www.groundfloormedia.com)

The sign of the times that was the late February shutdown of the Rocky Mountain News is the result of a long-brewing sea change in the public's media-consumption habits. It follows that it also represents a sea change in public relations. Less newsprint and fewer newsrooms make for less opportunity for companies to get exposure in traditional media.

In the wake of the collapse of the daily, new media is emerging at a furious pace, in the form of hundreds of social-networking sites on the Internet, with a new one seemingly sprouting every day. Facebook is the largest such site worldwide—with some 175 million users—and MySpace, LinkedIn, Ning and others have sizable audiences and more specific niches. Twitter is the current king of the micro-blogging hill and perhaps the most buzzed-about site on the Web—at least until the next big thing appears, probably any day now.

But this explosion does not mean it's time to abandon more time-tested PR strategies with the traditional media. Diane Nagler of Diane Nagler Public Relations in Denver says there are still plenty of opportunities in print publications.

"Everybody's taking a hit, but the big ones aren't going away," she says. "If you have good editorial content, you have readers, and advertisers will follow." Nagler says clients who want to garner attention in big national publications are unfazed by the publishing industry's travails.

Regardless, online social media is a must in any 21st century PR plan, Nagler adds. "All of my clients have a page on Facebook," she says. As Nagler's clients run the gamut from plastic surgeon Dr. **Gregory Buford** to children's entertainment group the Jumpitz, social networking is clearly an industry-agnostic activity.

Nagler says that the PR power of "tweets" (short blog posts) on Twitter and status updates on Facebook are undeniable: One casual mention could represent the equivalent of a mountain of ink-drenched newsprint. "It's amazing how one little post can rock your world," she says.

Evidence of Twitter's growing power was clear at a recent Twitter Boot Camp, staged by futurist think tank DaVinci Institute. About a dozen men and women sat elbow to elbow with laptops open for three hours as

Deb Frey, or @DaVinciDeb to her 6, 139 Twitter followers, instructed them how to expand their "spheres of influence."

Unlike Facebook, on Twitter, "a lot of people you follow will be strangers," Frey said. That's because the tool's search function allows you to connect with others who share interests—from gourmet cooking to software development. That's why Twitter is great for networking, asking advice and quickly gathering and disseminating information. Companion tools such as Twellow—hood.com allow tweeters to further narrow their searches by geography.

And best of all is the instant nature of Twitter. It gives information junkies access to people who can help them—right now. "It's very important to use keywords in your (Twitter) bio," DaVinci Institute Executive Director Tom Frey said. "That's how people find you."

Tech industry guru Dave Taylor, of AskDaveTaylor.com, said he first hooked into Twitter at a conference about a year and a half ago. Using Twitter, Taylor said he was able to quickly solicit advice about where to grab a good bite to eat—and ask other questions of the group. Twitter is an "extraordinarily effective" way to communicate with a number of people at once, said Taylor, who was among the Twitter Boot Camp attendees.

As more people discover Twitter—there are more than 3 million people tweeting now—and use Facebook and other social media tools, knowing how to make your message stand out is crucial.

In this new digital landscape of social networking, a little PR stagecraft still goes a long way, Nagler notes. "Your message is lost in a sea of status updates if you're not careful," she says. Beyond the need for a bit of creative wordplay, this is a duty that cannot be easily outsourced. Authenticity is critical. "With something like Twitter or personal status updates, they have to come from you and they have to be authentic. If it's not authentic, it's transparent."

The social aspect of social networking makes it a natural for, well, all things social. "I'm also finding clients when they post pictures from an event are getting a lot of interest. It drives buzz. Facebook is going to be huge for philanthropies and philanthropic events."

There is plenty of potential for backlash, Nagler adds. "We are so under the microscope with this stuff. I'm not a subscriber to 'all press is good press.' I caution my clients to be careful what they put out on their personal pages. That's what can get you into trouble. Your marital status? That's irrelevant. Your birth year? Irrelevant."

More relevant, says Nagler, is having workplace guidelines for social networking to prohibit employees from surfing Facebook all day long. "Twitter could be even more of a time-suck than Facebook," she warns.

But as more and more eyeball time goes toward social-networking sites—and social-networking elements on websites of traditional publications—it also is increasingly a direction marketers will want their PR pushes to veer.

And the next wave of Web 2.0 startups will likely be the brainchildren of former daily newspaper staffers launching Internet-only niche publications that integrate professionally produced journalism and social networking. In Colorado, Boulder-based MindfulMama ([www.mindfulmama.com](http://www.mindfulmama.com)) and Fort Collins-based GenGreen ([www.gengreenlife.com](http://www.gengreenlife.com)) are examples of such hybrid sites that meld social networking with original articles and other content.

Michael Adams of Johnston Wells Public Relations in Denver says the dwindling opportunity in traditional media means companies ignoring the Facebook revolution do so at their own peril. "There are fewer reporters," he says.

In Adams' eyes, however, social media does not entirely fill the vacuum left by departed print publications.

"Some people see it as a replacement for traditional media, but for the most part we see it as a complement," he says.

Many executives see the wild and woolly world of two-way communication as something they should fear, not utilize. Companies "are worried about not having control of their message," Adams says. "They're worried about not having control over their message online. Whether they like it or not, they don't anyway."

Adams says Johnston Wells has advised clients on blogging since 2005 and utilizing other social media since 2007. The agency now offers video production and custom blog and social-media development alongside more traditional PR products and services.

His advice: "You don't want to be on Facebook and these other social media sites if you don't commit to it." Adams makes an analogy to an e-newsletter that disappears. "You get the first issue then there's nothing. The same thing happens with social media.

"We spend a lot of time counseling our clients" about social media," he adds. "What we don't like to do is maintain their Facebook page for them. When it comes to actually doing it, it's much more effective if the company is actually doing it."

Facebook and other social networking technologies "allow clients to engage directly with their target audience and get feedback from that audience," says Adams, citing Saturn as a social-media standout. With traditional advertising and PR, he notes, "It's a one-way thing. But on social networks, if someone becomes a fan of you they have to do it voluntarily. They're there because they want to be."

And a networked audience turns out to be a very powerful tool. Starbucks, for instance, uses its Face-book page to test new products, offer coupons, launch marketing campaigns and set up focus groups.

"You're getting immediate feedback by engaging your fans," Adams says. "Many times you're going to have angry customers. What's important is how you respond to it."

#### LEXICON OF MAJOR SOCIAL-NETWORKING SITES:

Facebook: The current cream of the social-networking crop with nearly 200 million users, Facebook offers businesses and other organizations the ability to create pages, and customers can become fans. [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

MySpace: The former market leader lost some of its luster after Fox bought it in 2005, but it remains a prime outlet to promote music, movies, books and other entertainment and media, [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)

LinkedIn: The top business-oriented social-networking site with about 40 million users in every imaginable industry. [www.linkedin.com](http://www.linkedin.com)

Twitter: Increasingly popular with public figures of all kinds, the micro-blogging standard-bearer allows users to post short "tweets" to other users, [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)

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*Highlights: 2009, Gregory Buford*