

This article appeared in the March 2013 issue of the ASCA Insider.

## Social Media Marketing for the Consulting Arborist

By [Marty Shaw, RCA #470](#)

It is difficult today to comprehend an arboricultural consulting practice without the internet. The World Wide Web has almost always been available to Consulting Arborists. The internet went public in 1989. Web pages and hyperlinks didn't even arrive until 1991. In 1994, I took the test to become an ISA Certified Arborist and usage of the World Wide Web was growing at a staggering 2,400%. When 1996 arrived I had already established a strong internet presence for the wholesale distribution of tree health care products and I was asked to contribute to an article that appeared in *Arborist News* entitled, "Arboriculture on the Internet". At the same time, Google and Amazon.com were leading the charge to change how people bought and sold goods and services all over the planet. Back then, I used traditional direct mail newsletters and promotional postcards to drive customer traffic to my websites. There wasn't much in the way of social media marketing going on back then--the social web was limited to personal e-mail, bulletin boards, and news groups.

In 1997, Six Degrees became the first social network where you could create a profile and share that information with other users--it peaked at about 1,000,000 members. Around that same period, bloggers were posting images and other content, while forums and list serves were being put to use by people who wanted to quickly exchange ideas. At the early stages of the social media spectacle, there were still very limited social networking tools for arborists (BTW, the ASCA listservs are still widely used today--just not for marketing purposes). Between 2003 and 2007, Linked-In, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Twitter, Flickr and many others were all launched (most came and then went after the .com bubble burst). The battle for users and content had begun. It was just six years ago, in 2007, when the smartphone and its associated apps revolutionized social media and made it possible to easily create content, stay in touch while you were on-the-go, and upload content to multiple networks- all at the push of a single touch-screen button or two.

Now just six years hence, social media is not just another marketing avenue, it is the best value, least cost and highest return way to reach clients and improve sales. Social Media Marketing is now Social Business. Media like Google+ reaches more than 85% of all demographics by propelling news and information straight through social barriers. As a result, social media has created some relatively new phenomena like viral videos, flash mobs, social actions, and the speed-of-light like spread of revolutionary ideas that disseminate at little or no cost to users. Never before in human history has the individual person had the potential to reach billions of people with compelling ideas, images and sounds at such a low price. All you need is a computer, an internet connection, a social media membership, some compelling content and the click of a mouse. The concept of reaching lots of people electronically is important if you want to harness some of that potential to develop your consulting practice.

*Content is the key.* You must do the work to provide it. There are some who seem to think that you will gain a productive following by simply producing a large volume of content. In reality, the opposite is true. You don't necessarily want to create capacious amounts of critical content for the masses--not everybody is going to be a potential client. You do want to reach the folks who can use your service and who are also able to pay, so your message may have to go through a lot of folks before you get to the ones that can use your services. Your content should be relevant, compelling, concise, entertaining--and it should be clear to anyone who sees it which audience you are trying to reach. Try to capitalize your content with the word-of-mouth like effect that good content in the digital age possesses.

Ask yourself--who should hear this content? What is the message? Why should they get in touch with me? Consider the pass-through affect from non-prospects to potential clients, and then style your content accordingly.

Although you can spend a lot of money on this stuff, you don't have to--but you do have to spend some

time getting the content right. If you have a good message that works, it may be worth putting some money into production and delivery--but that is a tough call because it doesn't always pan out. I suggest starting with several low budget market research efforts and then re-invest in the ones that show promise.

Today, there are hundreds of choices, all vying for your time, attention and money. I have used the social media outlets mentioned earlier in this article effectively--but I don't consider myself to be an expert at all--yet. Compared to the size of our potential market out in the world, there are relatively few qualified Consulting Arborists to uncover and fulfill all of the need. I think we should be pooling our ideas together to find more effective ways of reaching those potential clients who can use and pay for the vital services that we have to offer. I have a long way to go before I can consider myself a social media aficionado, so if you have found something that works for you, I would love to hear about it and share it with our peers. If we can find more effective ways of getting our message out to our target audience, I am confident that we will find that the pie is much larger and tastier than we currently think or imagine.