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## Social Media Tools for the Extension Toolbox

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### Abstract

Social media can be a powerful tool for communities to use to connect to their citizens. This article outlines various free social media tools available to communities to better connect with their citizens. The descriptions of these tools will help Extension workers and communities to learn which social media outlet will best work for their community, how they can be used to reach out to citizens, and how they can be used to gather data about the community.

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## Introduction

In today's technical world, it is important for communities to use new tools, such as social media, to build community. Social media can be defined as digital networks that enable people to organize, socialize, learn, play, and participate in community networking. In 2010, the average American spent nearly 23% of their Internet time on social media, up from 16% a year earlier (O'Neill, Zumwalt, & Bechman, 2011). Social media is free and easy to use, and it can be used on the move, allowing people to be heard without giving up much of their time. Joanne Kinsey (2010) states that unfortunately many Extension personnel and community leaders continue to use existing methods to gather data rather than adopting new methods, such as social media, which provide opportunities for sharing information and keeping electronic logs for future use. These tools can be used to see the community through the eyes of people on the ground (S. Williams, personal communication, May 22, 2013). Social media tools allow communities to become increasingly transparent by building relationships with and engaging their citizens.

## Social Media

Social media is a form of electronic communication, such as social networking and micro blogging websites, where users create online communities. These communities are used to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content, such as videos and photos (Social Media, 2013). Extension personnel can use the following social media platforms to connect and engage with citizens to gather data and ideas that will be used to make the community a better place to live, work, and

play.

## Facebook

Facebook allows users to create an interactive Web page where they can share information about themselves, such as life updates, photos, videos, articles, and Internet links. Users are also able to check into places, such as restaurants, and leave comments about what they liked or disliked from those places. There are numerous technologies available online to gather this data, which can then be used to see which places within the community are frequented most. By mapping this data, leaders can see which places should be invested in or market highly visited places causing more people from outside the community to visit. This increases the community's economic development through tourism.

Communities are also able to create pages for themselves. Extension and community leaders may find it beneficial to use these pages to communicate information regarding upcoming events, town meetings, elections, educational opportunities, etc. Facebook could also be used in addition to town meetings to pose questions to citizens, allowing communities to gain additional input regarding the creation of new plans and regulations, or simply to gain insight as to what citizens would like to see in their communities. This will allow Extension and other leaders to better serve and meet the community's needs.

## Twitter

Twitter offers users a webpage where they are able to micro-blog about their lives, share videos, photos, ideas, and opinions. Each micro-blog, called tweets, can be up to 140 characters long and allows users to communicate with each other. Users are encouraged to follow others, allowing them to keep in touch with friends, learn about their favorite celebrities, educational and employment opportunities, nonprofit organizations, and what is happening in their community. Twitter would allow communities to get real-time information to citizens regarding events, emergencies, meetings, road closures, etc. It can also be used to gather feedback on planning related items and gain support for other initiatives within the community (Twitter, 2013).

## Foursquare

Foursquare allows users to electronically check into places throughout the city, such as home, work, restaurants, and school. This allows users to recommend which places should be visited and leave information as to what they liked about the place. Then based on a user's interests, Foursquare and friends can recommend places for them to visit (Foursquare, 2013).

Foursquare allows communities to create their own listings and connect with users within the community. This can be done by sharing community news through posting updates, specials, or events that will attract visitors to the community and reward them on Foursquare for visiting. It also has a free analytics tool that gives communities data as to who visitors are, when they came, how much they're talking about the community in other social networks, etc. Foursquare also allows users to play games, which can make checking into places more fun, as prizes are sometimes rewarded for

winning a game or for simply checking into a place (Foursquare, 2013).

## Nextdoor

Nextdoor is a private social network for neighborhoods or communities that is password-protected and not accessible by search engines. In order to gain access to the group, a person's address must be verified, ensuring that only people within the same neighborhood join the network. Despite living near each other, people have a difficult time connecting because of differing schedules and numerous other things. This network creates a private place for neighbors to meet, connect, share local information, keep their neighborhood safe with an online neighborhood watch, or share items and recommendations with each other (Nextdoor, 2013).

## i-Neighbors

i-Neighbors is a private website for communities, whose membership is controlled by local administrators. Website content is only available to the members in that specific community. Its purpose is to increase local interaction between neighbors by sharing ideas, items, and recommendations. Discussion occurs through an email-based forum; however, it also includes a directory and profiles to allow people to communicate in other ways. Another way to gather data is through its polling option. This will allow Extension and community leaders to pose questions and have citizens vote for what they believe the best option will be (i-Neighbors, 2013).

## Conclusion

While traditional practices of connecting with community members are still valid ways to gather data, Extension and community workers will be able to greatly expand who their reach by using social media tools. While the list above is not an exhaustive list of tools, it shows how social media can be used to further build and connect communities.

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