

The Encyclopedia of Social Media

BY LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA

The evolving nature of social media venues certainly has changed fitness communication. Gone are the snail mail printed flyers, “newsletters” and even hard-selling “email blasts.” Social media, or the ability to use electronic means to connect to other individuals of similar interests based on one’s own criteria, is replacing many traditional means of social interaction, both personal and professional. Angela Broderick Bedell, creator of Marketingwell.com, claims that, “after word of mouth, social media is the most affordable and commonplace marketing tool fitness professionals can use today.” Via a very informal, social tone, let’s explore some of the advantages to the most popular burgeoning forms of electronic communication: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn®. If you are new to social media, think about how the overall theme of *building business relationships* weaves throughout all the suggestions in this article.

To be sure, some fitness professionals face social media with trepidation. Rest assured that users have *full* control of establishing all free social media accounts addressed in this article with full control of name, birthdate, marital status, address and other personal information. Perhaps the most powerful thing about social media—after the fact that it is free—is that each individual has control over how much of his or her *private* life actually becomes *social*.

Building Fitness

Relationships

From the point of view of an instructor and personal trainer, social media can fill gaps by engaging clients and classes in conversations that cannot take place in the gym because conversations, by nature, must be movement-related. From the point of view of a fitness presenter, social media can continue a message. One of the key reasons why AFAA continuing education provider Keli Roberts draws such large numbers of fitness enthusiasts around the globe is that she builds fitness relationships by revealing appropriate aspects of her personal life. "Instead of just teaching a session at a convention and leaving, social media connects me with all the different people in my life," she says, "from people who take my regular classes, my personal training clients, and even instructors who take my workshops globally because we connect in a way that transcends squats and lunges."

Facebook

Social media bridges the gap between self and others. Broderick Bedell says that a key component for success in the competitive world of today's fitness market involves building relationships to show yourself as more than teacher and trainer, and Facebook facilitates this. If you remove all of the traditional *hardware* of fitness—the physical space, the equipment, the music and the footwear (or lack of it these days!)—you are left with the true *software* of fitness: the personality behind every group fitness instructor and personal trainer. To build relationships, social media can expose our personalities so that the fitness world sees more about what makes us who we are, beyond what we exude when just training and teaching.

And it runs both ways, too. Julz Arney, fitness educator and program creator based in Costa Mesa, Calif., claims that social media gives you a sneak peek into your clients' lives so that you know more about them and can then bring it up in real-life conversation. She says, "this is a simple way to make them feel valued, and it demonstrates you are a fitness professional who really cares about them beyond the gym." Ultimately, social media can create a deeper, more loyal connection with the people we teach and train.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Facebook is its immediacy. Nowhere in the world can one opinion, photograph or post generate more immediate response than this social media outlet. Social media offers fitness professionals a free international market-research network of individuals who can opine about what works and what does not. AFAA Primary Certified instructor Bernadette O'Brien, developer of the Facebook group "Aqua Stars America," asks questions of other aqua instructors internationally, and also interacts with her own aqua students. She has them "co-create" her classes by answering such posts as "choose your one favorite piece of aquatic equipment for next week's classes," or "tell me your favorite Broadway song for a special playlist." At 81, she shows that social media is appropriate for any age.

Facebook posts also involve applicability and responsibility. When Facebook first began, a trend was to promote a class before or after by saying how "great" or "packed" it was. The newer trend is to post something factual about that class: perhaps a live video

testimonial from an excited participant; the charity for which the class raised funds; an invitation to the club to get a bigger picture; or the teaser to next week's class to elicit interest.

Shannon Fable, program developer, webinar master and industry icon based in Colorado, agrees with the newer trends and responsibilities of fitness posting. "When I watch others in fitness make posts and tweets, I wish I could just shout out that not everyone cares about crazy diets, waiting in line, or the most intense workout you've done today. Some of the people we are trying to reach aren't motivated by the extreme measures some fitness professionals go for their bodies and fitness. I get worried that we may actually be casting an unrealistic light on fitness in the eyes of some folks that just 'happen' to be watching. Just keep in mind that *lots* of people can see you, not just the folks you associate with, because fitness is a global initiative that we all could potentially negatively affect."

Roberts suggests harnessing the power of visual stimulation. "Use Facebook to show in one visual posting what could cover an extended period of time, using permission-given testimonial pictures [before and after] of client success stories." Because of the nature of "tagging," whereby friends of friends can see posts and pictures, public success stories may affect the decisions of others who want to book your services hoping for similar results. Fable tells us that visuals (photographs and videos) can generate up to a 50% higher read rate.

Social Media "Conversations"

Facebook also allows fitness professionals to continue the conversation in a deeper fashion. Telling students at the end of class, "I'm looking at planning our summer vacation in my free hour today, so I'll be hitting you all up for some thoughts" plants a seed. Later, posting your top three vacation-spot suggestions with an invitation for your friends to post their opinions not only reveals human, personal aspects about you, but also involves them in a part of your life beyond fitness. Arney agrees, recommending to "start the conversation before class and keep it going after 'on the wall,' including offering a Q & A about the workout or [posting] advice on what to do between now and when you see them again."

Twitter

Twitter functions in a way similar to Facebook, but posts are limited to 140 characters. Think of Twitter as an even more immediate and portable Facebook. Posts tend to be short and transient in nature. Whereas Facebook may post the "finished product" of an event, such as the Most Valuable Player photographs taken at every live BOSU® training, a tweet may actually be a teaser with the presenter tweeting, "I'm off to teach BOSU Balanced Body in 30 minutes in Dallas," for example. To be sure, Facebook currently reaches more people, but people tend to believe tweets as more newsworthy because of their immediacy. To make both tweets and Facebook posts seem less daunting to the time-crunched fitness professional, Broderick Bedell suggests using free computer programs like HootSuite to link both accounts so your postings appear in both places.

Lawrence's Social Media Practical Tips:

- Attach a photograph or video clip to every set of words. Not only do these generate comments, likes and shares, but pictures truly do stimulate more comments than word-based posts.
- Use the 3-2-1 rule. After every 3 posts about you as a person (your life, shopping, cuisine, pets, etc.), the fourth post should be a "selling" post promoting a class, charity or event.
- Changing "relationship status" weekly doesn't give anyone a voice in credibility.
- Use posts to create a buzz. Anticipation is more business friendly than conclusion. (Tease about an upcoming event over time to engage more people, and then post one photograph or video of the grand finale.)
- Keep tweets to words; if you have to add a picture or video, that makes it Facebook-appropriate.
- For Facebook posts, always make sure you are friends and/or "like" the pages of all persons and/or companies you will mention before posting. Then, when posting, always preface every person and/or company with the "@" symbol to include them—and all of their fans—in your posts, thereby reaching exponentially more viewers with every word.

LinkedIn

The social arena of "LinkedIn" serves as a sort of virtual résumé system in which professional profiles are sought after and shared. Melissa Baumgartner, Founder of Wellness Speaks, a company that specializes in coaching, says that LinkedIn helps those without their own websites to connect in the professional job market with others. "LinkedIn," she says, "is quickly becoming a one-stop-shop for decision makers when looking for the right person for the job." Personally, she found it useful when an employer contacted her for a position based on her LinkedIn profile exclusively. She comments, "I was hired [last year] to be a presenter for them in 2012. They found me through LinkedIn. They found me, called me, and hired me on the spot. All I did was have my profile page current (which led them to my website, FB and Twitter feed, automatically)."

Caveats & Courtesy From the Pros

Fable's Tip: "Perhaps the most often overused or misused use of social media these days in the fitness arena is inviting people to opportunities or events that are not geographically desirable and adding people to groups without soliciting their approval."

Arney's Tip: "Perhaps most overused are quotes! I don't want to read your clever quote from someone else, I want to learn about YOU!"

Roberts' Tip: "So overused is YouTube! There's so much junk on YouTube that an unsuspecting consumer can get really erroneous information based on what's out there."

Social Media Assignment: Tweet This Article!

Now, gentle social-media connected reader, your homework assignment is twofold:

Step 1: LIKE the official AFAA Facebook page, and FOLLOW AFAA FITNESS on Twitter based on these links below. Beware of imposters!

Step 2: POST a comment about your favorite social media tip, trick or thought; alternatively, you can just post your comment to this article.

AFAA on Facebook:

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LAWRENCE BISCONTINI, MA, is an AFAA Contributing Writer and Certification Specialist. He has won multiple Instructor of the Year awards and looks forward to accepting new Facebook friends daily. Find Lawrence at www.findlawrence.com.

