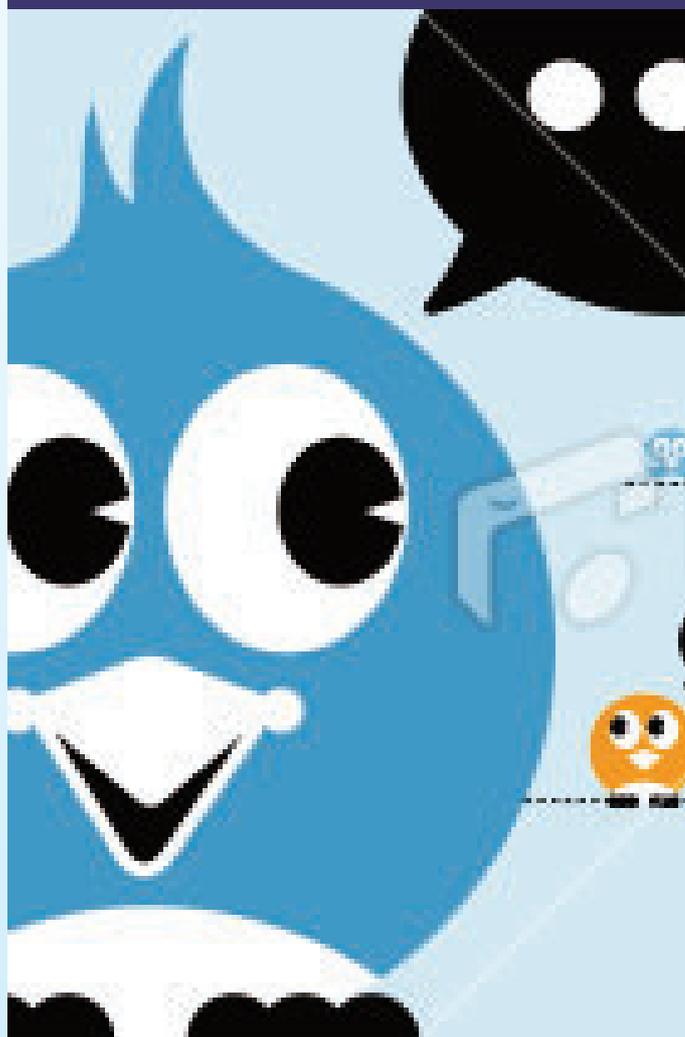


Harnessing social media - networking at your fingertips

Guest Article by Inspire IT Services



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What is Social Media?? Which are the most widely used applications? How much time should I invest in it? What can it do for my business? Questions, Questions, Questions... Is there a simple answer? Social Media tools and applications will come and go, but what will remain is what you need it to achieve.

If you can imagine the web as a global village, then Social Media is the social discourse which goes on within it. With people tweeting, commenting on blogs, uploading video content, changing their status, responding to invites, finding and de-friending friends, these are all actions of people engaged in Social Media and the sheer scale of the interaction is now colossal.

Even the most traditional of organisations are recognising its applications. You can reflect on how deeply the nature of our society is changing when churches start to use Twitter to engage with their congregations.

If non-business organisations are utilising the power of the web to reach out and engage their audience, then what is happening within the business sector?

"A recent poll of 1,068 marketing professionals found that 66% planned to invest in social media marketing during 2010, with up to 40% claiming they would shift over a fifth of their direct marketing budget towards online marketing and websites such as Twitter." (Alterian, 2010)

Types of Social Media

Social Media is a method of communication which can take the form of one or more of the below.

- **Text** - can be used to put across opinions or write blog posts
- **Images** - photo-sharing websites allow you to upload pictures and images to an account which can then be viewed by web users. Flickr is an example of a successful photo-sharing site
- **Audio** - lets you create podcasts for users to download from your website
- **Video** - video-sharing sites allow you to upload and share your videos with the rest of the web community. The most well known video sharing website is YouTube

Social networking websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn allow you to create a personal profile and share information with others. LinkedIn is being used by many professionals as a way of finding out who is connected to who and trying to gain new business from these contacts. Facebook tends to be used more socially, but with over 400 million users globally, and the average Facebook user having 130 'friends', this becomes a gathering place of consumers you can't ignore.

Presence applications, such as Twitter, allow you to post micro blogs announcing what you are doing. Whilst we might associate Twitter with what Stephen Fry ate for breakfast, Twitter is a powerful tool which can be harnessed to your benefit if you think outside the box.

The good news is that both the Social Media and the all important Metrics tools are free, the biggest investment in social media, will need to be your time.