They’re talking about you.

The residents who live in your apartments, the tenants who lease your commercial space, they’re talking about you.

“Understand that people are now communicating about you and your properties online,” said Paul Gillin, author of *Secrets of Social Media Marketing*. “Those conversations are going on whether you want them to or not.”

Gillin defines social media as technology that allows people to publish quickly and cheaply on the Internet. It promotes live and instant discussion on a variety of topics. In a business context, it allows consumers to promote their purchases or air their grievances, and business owners to receive feedback about their products or services.

“It’s a cheaper, faster way to connect with a target audience,” said Patti Guerzo, president of Guerzo Business Solutions Center, a Chicago-based business advisory firm for entrepreneurs that offers social media consulting.

**BLOGGING, TWEETING, LINKING, FRIENDING**

Various social media tools exist: Blogs are a series of brief, regularly published commentaries on a particular topic. *Twitter* (www.twitter.com) users provide “followers” with
regular updates on their thoughts and undertakings, but each update is limited to 140 characters.

The social networking sites LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and Facebook (www.facebook.com) allow users to create personal profiles and then link to profiles of friends and acquaintances. Facebook is more socially oriented at this time, with people listing their favorite books and movies and posting photos. But companies are starting to dip their toes in to Facebook as well, creating “Fan Pages” to connect with their audience. LinkedIn is the more professional site; profiles read like resumes, and it’s acceptable to connect with bosses, co-workers and customers.

Shannon Alter, CPM®, president of Alter Consulting Group in Santa Ana, Calif., said she recently began using LinkedIn for networking purposes. She said it’s like having six degrees of separation from anyone in the profession who also uses the site, making it helpful to those individuals looking for work or wanting to connect with colleagues for advice.

Amanda Young, CPM, property manager for Brandywine Realty Trust in Richmond, Va., has used LinkedIn to find reputable vendors. After talking with other property managers in a LinkedIn discussion forum about how to stop the spread of germs, Young bought the Dyson hand dryers recommended by other discussion participants for one of her commercial buildings in Glen Allen, Va. Young began using LinkedIn after receiving several invites from vendors and another co-worker.

Nicholas Dunlap, CPM, property supervisor at Dunlap Property Group, AMO® in Fullerton, Calif., said he waded into social media one tool at a time. He started writing a corporate blog at http://dpgliving.wordpress.com in 2006 offering his perspective on property management industry news. Dunlap added a second blog in 2009 aimed squarely at potential residents. It shows interior photos from available units to entice people to schedule a showing.

His motivation for using social media tools stemmed from his company’s success using Craigslist (www.craigslist.com) and other online advertising years ago. He said it was obvious social media sites could be used to the company’s advantage.

“For us, it works two-fold,” Dunlap said. “First and foremost, we are capable of providing our current and prospective clients with updated information and insight into the marketplace, and second, we are able to quickly and creatively market our move-in specials, bonuses and incentives to the masses by way of cutting-edge, online advertising.”

FINDING A FOLLOWING

That advertising has the potential to go a long way, considering about 60 percent of Americans use social media. Of that group, 85 percent believe companies should interact with their customers using social media tools, according to a 2008 study by Cone, a Boston-based communications company.

Lori Burger, CPM, senior vice president at Eugene Burger Management Corp., AMO, in Rohnert Park, Calif., agrees. She said the success of social networking should encourage property managers to consider changing their marketing strategies. According to Burger, marketing efforts in recent years have been focused on how to bring clients to corporate and property Web sites. With this new evolution, she said marketing efforts must be focused on “where the party is.”

“We want to be where our employees are networking; where potential clients and customers are networking; where their colleagues and friends, friends of friends and their friends of friends are networking,” Burger said. “The marketing opportunities and lead generations are endless.”

Dunlap said his blogs have improved the company Web site’s search engine ranking because of the refreshed content, and have resulted in signed leases because of featured photos of rentable space. His corporate blog that offers industry perspective also helps position him as an expert, said Julie Szabo, co-author of Friends With Benefits: A Social Media Marketing Handbook. That can lead to opportunities like new business.

“When you choose a marketing consultant, a property manager or a hair dresser, you’re choosing a person, not a company,” she said. “A blog goes a long way to show the people behind the business, and that appeals to us.”

Burger also suggests creating your own blog. In this situation, you can control the discussion questions. Your clients and customers can talk about experiences, pose questions, and discuss problems with you leading the discussion. By creating your own blog, you can generate discussions that followers will care about while generating valuable credibility and the ability to engage the masses.

Guerzo said Facebook and Twitter are the social media sites currently experiencing growth and where companies’ marketing efforts will go the furthest. Guerzo said actually
buying into Facebook advertising is cheaper than pay-for-click campaigns, and more effective.

She said one of her clients spent $95 for a Facebook ad and received 869,000 impressions, meaning the company was served up for viewing 869,000 times on Web pages. From that, the company received 115,000 clicks, and 40 of those people joined the company’s fan page. The fan page is like virtual word-of-mouth marketing.

Another advantage to these social media tools, particularly Facebook and Twitter, Guerzo said, is their ability to capture behavioral information about users. As a result, the audiences are much more valuable than a random mailing list.

“You can target the exact people you want,” she said. “It’s better to have 100 loyal followers than 100,000 useless followers.”

Guerzo said using social media tools will distinguish a company from its many competitors not using them. Small businesses have been especially slow to adopt social networking tools.

According to an October 2009 Citibank/GfK Roper survey of about 500 U.S. small business owners, 76 percent of respondents said social networking sites have not been helpful in generating business leads for expanding their business in the last year. Eighty-six percent of respondents said they have not used the sites for business advice or information.

If more companies adopt the technology, Guerzo said, social media users could lose their edge.

“There is an advantage to doing it,” she said, “whereas next year there might be a disadvantage to not doing it.”

VIRTUAL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION
To reap the advantages of using social media tools, companies must use them judiciously and have a broad plan, Guerzo said.

“Strategy is important,” she said. “Otherwise, you get lost in the weeds and you don’t focus on the right things.”

A company should first create a plan that includes its ultimate goal, and then lay out which tools will best accomplish that goal.

Guerzo said companies need to consider the content they want distributed; their ideal customer’s description; industry information or news sources they can rely on for content; visual content they can use; testimonials they can publish; and potential questions they can ask followers,
particularly for Twitter accounts, that will elicit interesting conversation.

“Simply communicating, ‘Buy my stuff,’ is not good marketing,” Guerzo said. “Those are boring messages and people don’t like them. The alternative is to think about what your customers want and offer that.”

She said a sample week of social media marketing might include five posts—one listing; two questions to strike up conversation that might draw renters into an area, like, “What restaurants do you love in this particular neighborhood?”; and two postings with helpful links.

“To the reader you appear to be a customer-focused company,” Guerzo said. “You’re viewed as progressive and friendly.”

Once companies determine the social media tools they will use, they must also figure out how to use those tools effectively and efficiently. Referring to the Web sites of the various social media tools is helpful. Any of the free blog hosting platforms will have an “about” section on its Web site that will direct users how to set up a blog.

“I learned to use most of these tools simply by accessing the Web site,” Dunlap said. “Most of these sites are very, very easy to use.”

SOCIALLY AWKWARD

Regardless of how easy social media tools are to use, or the opportunities they offer, they also present challenges. The negative feedback posted on these sites is especially concerning to businesses, social media experts and real estate managers said.

Brad Ashley, CPM, senior property manager at CB Richard Ellis, AMO, in Kansas City, Mo., said social media tools are as risky as they are rewarding. He said while Facebook might publicize a building’s amenities, it might publicize problems, too.

In the past, a resident unhappy with maintenance might have called the office to complain, he said. Now, a resident can post that complaint to a property’s Facebook “wall,” a public area where users write comments, telling 100 or 200 people that there may or may not be a problem, Ashley said.

How a company responds to negative feedback can be equally damaging. Consider Horizon Group Management, a Chicago-based property management company that became front-page news when it sued a resident who used Twitter to complain about her apartment. The company was blasted for its reaction, which generated more attention than the negative comment posted by the renter to her 20 followers (see “Social Breakdown” on previous page).

Negative comments are simply a part of online life, social media experts said, and they don’t all carry the capacity to damage. Often anonymous, individuals who post comments undercut their own credibility by staking out extreme positions, using profane language or typing exclamation points in excess.

For the adept property manager, though, online attacks represent an opportunity. People complain because they’re frustrated, Gillin said, and listening to their concerns can work magic. The worst critics often transform into the biggest fan when a company honestly and directly addresses their complaints.

Like them or not, social media tools are assuredly here to stay. Even if the current popular tools cease to exist, others will evolve. As a result, businesses must accept the new terms.

Rather than ignore these social media outlets, companies should determine how they will manage their business with these outlets, experts said.

“It’s too late,” Hay said. “You’ve already lost control. The remedy is to become part of the conversation.”

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