Social Media in Continuing Education Departments
By Jamie Schwaba, Director of Continuing Education, UW-Marinette, Marinette, WI

As the Director of Continuing Education (CE) at University of Wisconsin–Marinette, which is located in a small community in the north woods of Wisconsin, I am always trying to determine where I should be focusing my precious and packed hours of the day. I have been curious to know what other CE professionals are utilizing when it comes to social media, what they feel is effective and what obstacles they face.

In the pursuit of answers to the questions I have been formulating, I surveyed 100 CE professionals through connections within the UW- System and across various LinkedIn groups. Professionals surveyed represent a range of work environments from departments with no full-time employees (FTE) to departments exceeding 30. The largest contingents are departments with four to eight FTE (30 percent). In line with national and global trends, social media sites and tools are being used in a variety of ways and are being is viewed as very or extremely important to departments by 86 percent of respondents. In fact, 92 percent of CE departments are currently using some form of social media.

In keeping with the spirit of the "social" in social media CE departments are finding ways to creatively engage with their audiences, while also still creating awareness and buzz of their programs. Like 62 percent of departments, I use Facebook, Flickr, and occasionally Pinterest and Twitter to share photos of programs and events. I have found this one of the best ways to create a buzz, especially if kids are involved. Don't forget to have families sign a photo release form! Don't forget social media can be a great way to direct traffic to your website, place employment listings, survey your audience, pass along industry specific articles and news, run contests, offer discounts and giveaways.

I know what you are thinking, I don't have time to start or do anything more with social media (58 percent of CE professionals said there is not enough time to incorporate more social media) or there are just too many choices (20 percent feel there are too many options). Well, I can't add more hours to your day but I may be able to provide you with a few tips, links and tricks to help you better measure your ROI (Return On Investment), make your time on social media more efficient and overcome other barriers such as buy-in from administration.

1. KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY: Survey your audience via SurveyMonkey.com, written program evaluations, or another method to find out what social media channels they are using and which other ways they find out about your programs. I have found through evaluations that 52 percent of my community find out about our programs through local newspapers, 44 percent from print brochures or flyers, 44 percent from emails, 36 percent from the university website, 36 percent from word of mouth (WOM), 28 percent from our Facebook pages and 12 percent from other social media sites. The top sites used by my audience are, in order: Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, LinkedIn, & Google+. My community has been slow to sign-on to usage, but I know it will continue to grow and I will do my best to be ready and be where they are. These statistics will likely be very different for your unique community or audience, but if you don't take the time to ask, you won't know where they are at and how to reach them. Though 53 percent of CE Professionals are using Twitter, with limited time and resources it doesn't make sense for me to invest in it, at least not with my current audience at this time.

2.   SHARE: Make sure you have social shares set up on your blog, email marketing and website. That way, even if you are not active on a specific channel, your participants and fans can share away—remarkable WOM without effort on your end!!!!

3.   SCHEDULE: Set aside a little time to schedule posts on your blog, Facebook or emails (through a client such as ConstantContact.com, Mailchimp.com or myemma.com). Doing this once a week will ensure you have a presence. Don't forget to check in every once in a while to make sure you are there to respond to questions or comments being made.

4.   NUMBERS DON'T LIE: If possible, set up Google Analytics on your website (get even more advanced by setting goals within it), or at least monitor your email client reports (open and click rates), Facebook (shares, likes, comments & exposure), Pinterest (repins and likes). You can use these numbers to determine what is working and also to convince social media skeptical administrators or coworkers.

5.   A PICTURE PAINTS 1,000 WORDS: If your Graphic Designer is swamped (or you don't have one) utilize free or affordable tools such as canva.com, picmonkey.com, placeit.net or piktochart.com (which I used to create the infographic included). These sites have tools that automatically size your post, banner or pin to fit your chosen platform. Most of these have a free version that is very robust or a paid version that allows you to remove their branding and gives your more layout or design options.

6.   NICHE GROUPS: If your audience is high users of Facebook you may want to consider creating separate pages for unique programs in addition to your general program page. This can be especially useful if your programming is diverse such as online professional development and Learning in Retirement (LIR). My department has had great success with our Children's Theatre page, as that is one of our benchmark programs. With different pages you can build engaged audiences and even boost free exposure by sharing from your general page onto your niche group. If you are among the 17 percent of participating departments that do not currently have a general Facebook page, you may want to consider starting there. Of survey respondents, 38 percent said they pay for Facebook Ads and feel that it is worthwhile, 22 percent said they pay for Ads, but are unsure if they working, 11 percent said they do not pay for Facebook Ads because they feel they are a waste of money. I have had small success in Facebook Ads, but I found lately if I can diversify the types of posts I use including lots of photos, contests and instructor profiles, I can greatly increase my organic (unpaid) reach.

The sky is the limit when it comes to social media and web tools, it is important to get to know your audience and slowly test to find your niches which help meet your engagement and programmatic goals without overwhelming you. Why not try one new thing today? You may find yourself pleasantly surprised the impact a little time will yield!