Raising Civic Engagement with Social Media

By Chandler Taylor

Gwen Baer is a student who regularly benefits from using social media since she began using it five years ago. Social media not only connected her to her local community but also connected her to her companion, Scully, a Border Collie mix.

Baer, a junior at Auburn University, said she is a frequent user of social media and on many different platforms. She regularly checks for updates on multiple organizations to stay engaged in the community. She said, “I am a ‘fan’ on Facebook of all the dog places around here.” This is how she found her beloved dog when she came across an advertisement online and on Facebook, with a photo of the black haired, dark-eyed pup that would soon be hers.

Social media exploded on the scene in 2004, empowering individuals and businesses to form and maintain relationships with others far and near. Social media continues to evolve, as citizens cultivate relationships. Now more are turning to social media to stay informed on national and community levels and becoming more civically involved like Baer.

Most social media can be a tool to benefit all community members. Social media can raise civic engagement and social connectiveness, which The Alabama Civic Health Index defines as “the frequency with which individuals connect and communicate with one another.” (http://ncoc.net/ALCHI2011)

According to research published in 2011 by The Alabama Civic Health Index, “Overall, 43 percent of Alabamians connect over the Internet a few times a week or more – this is less than the national rate of 54 percent.” Although Alabama citizens are below the national average, more and more nonprofits and businesses are using social media to reach community members and promote their cause.

Social Media and Non-Profits

Gwen Baer said that For Paws Boutique and Rescue, a pet grooming, training and adoption center in Auburn, Ala., is asking for donations right now. She said, “If they hadn't used social media to advertise that, I wouldn't have known to give them the stuff my dog doesn't need.” Regarding their success with social media, Rebekah Perry, owner of For Paws, said, “We post things on Facebook when we are having events. Any information we can get out there, the better.”

Similar to For Paws, the Lee County Humane Society uses Facebook and the result of using social media platforms, increased adoptions. Currently, the Lee County Humane Society has 5,565 followers on their Facebook page, which director of public relations and development Stacee Peer said they use to promote adoptable pets, donation needs, adoption promotions, job postings, volunteer needs and special events. (http://www.facebook.com/LeeCountyHumaneSociety)
Peer said, “I believe social media is very positive for the community. I feel that our audience feels more connected when they are able to share a picture of an adoptable pet and potentially help it find a home and help grow our fan base.”

Another positive use of social media for the humane society, Peer said, is that it is the best form of free advertising for the shelter and allows for an open dialog between the organization and its publics.

In fact, in a National Conference on Citizenship article, Beth Kanter, author of “Beth’s Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media,” one of the most popular non-profit blogs, noted, “I think that nonprofits can integrate the use of social media in many different ways from program delivery, volunteer recruitment and more. Using social media for fundraising and awareness is probably the tip of the iceberg.”

(http://www.ncoc.net/SNS_CivicEngagement_relationship_status)

In Kanter’s belief that social media can benefit non-profits is the fact that both For Paws and the Lee County Humane Society use social media to their advantage to raise awareness for their non-profit organizations.

Social Media Across Ages

The Alabama Civic Health Index reported that, in 2010, “Individuals between the ages of 20 and 24 hold the highest percentage of connectivity at 70.4%. The lowest age group is that of citizens age 65 and older at only connect at 24.1%.”

This age gap though is slowly changing. Shannon Bryant-Hankes, social media, communication & marketing specialist for the Auburn Alumni Association, said, “I think the older generation is teaching themselves because they want to text their grandchildren, they want to stay connected and want to get on Facebook to talk with their kids.”

In fact, an even more recent survey by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project shows this change over only two years from 2010 to 2012: “more than half of adults 65 and older are online. One in three of them uses social networking sites such as Facebook, Skype or Twitter.” (http://www.aarp.org/home-family/personal-technology/info-10-2012/social-media-attracting-seniors-mo.html)

The Auburn Alumni Association reaches more than 12,178 people on Facebook and 65,000 on Twitter and LinkedIn. Bryant-Hankes said, “Now we are able to touch so many more people, so quickly and a broader range than we’ve ever done before. They create conversation across all ages through these outlets, bringing awareness to community events, encouraging involvement and simply keeping the alumni connected to Auburn no matter where they live.”

Bryant-Hankes specifically said social media helps them as a creative tool to promote civic engagement and social connectiveness through providing feedback and listening to their audience.

Exchanging feedback is what she said is key for any business or organization using
She said, “We will make a post and people will start talking to each other, which is really great. You have this reaction where you have this large group all interacting through social media.”

**Social Media Promoting Political Activism**

Driving political activism and citizen involvement is another benefit social media can provide to the community. In the Mashable article, “22 percent Have Shared Their Vote on Social Media,” Pew Research Center found that social media, democracy and activism are becoming more and more intertwined.

Andrew Sims, digital manager at Infomedia in Birmingham, Ala., said, “This past election, if that isn’t an indicator of how powerful social media can be, I don’t know what can.”

Pew Research Center found that during this past election more than one in five registered voters broadcast their presidential picks via social media. The study also concluded that 29 percent of respondents used social media to share their personal vote, and 34 percent used it to try to sway others votes. ([http://mashable.com/2012/11/06/22-percent-share-vote-social-media/](http://mashable.com/2012/11/06/22-percent-share-vote-social-media/))

Robert French, Auburn University instructor and social media expert, said, “Social media is slowly starting to become the channel of choice in particular demographics.” As social media reaches all ages, he suggested. He suggested, it’s not only raising political engagement but also encouraging civic engagement and volunteerism.

In research conducted by The National Conference on Citizenship, “Netizens,” Baby-Boomers and Matures, of the older generations, were more likely to use the Internet to express these kinds of opinions on social and political issues.

In fact, the NCOC article, “Netizens,” also reported that those who use the Internet for three or more civic purposes “are much more likely than other people to attend public meetings in which there was a discussion of community affairs, attend a club meeting or take part in a protest or demonstration.” ([http://www.ncoc.net/261](http://www.ncoc.net/261))

**Social Media and Community Volunteerism**

The citizens who are on the Internet and attending more public meetings and community events are those who communities and organizations such as the Humane Society, Alumni Association and others are targeting. French said that Opelika, Ala., is a community that uses social media for volunteerism.

He said, “Opelika has been heavily using social media for their Recreation Center. They not only seek to drive Opelika citizens, they’re after Auburn and students. They are continuously posting on their various outlets, and it works for them.”
Likewise, another local business that uses social media for their own benefits, community involvement and to support community relationships is the Earth Fare grocery store in Auburn. Earth Fare is on Facebook and Twitter, which they use to start conversation and bring awareness to what’s going on in the community.

Brooke Harris, Earth Fare community relations manager, said, “Instead of paying for billboards and advertising we take that money and try to use it in the community by giving food away or to support a local race by bringing bananas and water.”

Earth Fare also sees increased community involvement related to using social media in the attendance at their weekly “Family Dinner Nights,” held every Thursday from 4-8p.m. Harris tracks the growth of weekly involvement on Earth Fare’s Facebook page and she also sees the promotion of social connectiveness. She said “I think food is universal so getting families to sit down and eat together is very important, especially in a community like this.”

The Future of Social Media and Civic Engagement

The Alabama Civic Health Index said, “By making social connectedness a priority, Alabamians should be able to increase individual and collective well-being.”

Students, like Gwen Baer, who found their companions from shelter’s online, political activists who changed public opinion via the Internet, and families and alumni who look to social media to stay connected to the community, prove that there are social media platforms to reach every citizen’s interest.

As French said, “Social media is here to stay.” Civic engagement and social connectiveness are complementary, and social media is beginning to weave its way into the mix by engaging citizens and benefitting the community.