

Social Media and Parking

**I've been into technology for a long, long time.
Even back when being called a "nerd" wasn't as cool as it is today. (It is cool, right?!)**

I got my first e-mail address in 1986 (yes, in the eighties!). It was the Internet's halcyon days... when "spam" was still a luncheon meat, a "virus" was something that infected only living beings, and a "banner ad" was flown behind an airplane.

But times have changed and the hot Internet activity for much of the last decade has been the spectacular rise of social media – basically the generation of content created by the masses, distributed in a highly accessible and scalable way. Two of the most popular social media sites today are Facebook and Twitter.

Is there a Facebook/Twitter angle to parking technology? Does social media even have a role in parking?

Well, at its core the business of Parking is really a business built on organizing the behavior of people. Contrary to popular belief, parking is not about vehicles or parking spaces. Parking services are all about people – specifically people who park.

Providing parkers with the right information at the right time is the key to encouraging the

behaviors that you want them to demonstrate. That's where Facebook and Twitter can help. Let's start with Twitter. This is a free technology that anyone can use to push out short messages to subscribers, very quickly, who can receive these messages though the web, on their cell phone, or as a text (SMS) message.

If you're going to send out such nearly real-time messages to your parking audience – Twitter would call these "tweets" – what messages would you send?

There are most likely two kinds of messages that are invaluable to a parker. The first type of tweet is an emergency message: For example: "Blue Garage - West entrance blocked, use North entrance" or "Snow clearance on Main St 3pm, no parking."

The second type of tweet that parkers find valuable is real-time information about parking at an event. In this case the parker would subscribe to a series of tweets (called a "feed") that was broadcast every few minutes about, say, occupancy at a lot or a garage. Driving downtown to get to the big game? Subscribe

to a twitter feed for 3 or 4 different parking lots and receive a message every 2 minutes about how many spaces remain available – when you're a few blocks from downtown you'll know which garages have spaces available. When you arrive, you unsubscribe from the feed. Good information, happy customer, less circling the block.

Facebook, on the other hand, is like a website. Many parking operations already have websites, so having a Facebook page for parking might be somewhat redundant. Facebook provides a mostly structured interface for you to post information, photos, or other media about the parking operation and control the message that you're putting out.

But the social component comes from the people (parkers) who subscribe to the content of the page by becoming a "friend" of the parking office. The parking operation can choose which content, or levels of content that a "friend" can see, and can also limit the amount that a "friend" can post or comment to the page. This gives a great deal of control to



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the parking operation on how information is distributed, and also provides a convenient mechanism for customer feedback and comments.

Also an interesting tidbit: Facebook and Twitter can be connected so that Facebook can “push” updates to Twitter, which in turn pushes information to your customers. Slick!

Are Facebook and Twitter really free? Well, they’re free to sign up and use as much as you like. But there is a cost - once your parkers get used to receiving tweets or visiting your page you will have an obligation to provide regular updates. So there is a cost – not for the service, but for your operation to produce regular content for your subscribing audience.

Does social media play a role in parking? This probably depends on your specific parking audience – a technically sophisticated parking audience (such as students on campus or frequent airport travelers) will embrace these features. There are already groups of parkers taking matters into their own hands and using text messages to help each other when it comes to parking (see the latest issue of NPA’s *Between the Lines* newsletter), so yes, there are signs that social media could be useful and appreciated by your parkers. A less-technical audience may not be as interested. But in any case social media can enhance the parker’s experience, and usage is likely to grow. ■

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