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Social Media: It's Not Just Personal Any More



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Plugged-in maritime executives are using Web sites like LinkedIn and Facebook to advance both their careers and their businesses.

By Barry Parker



Shipping is like a big club. Its communal nature, overcoming separation across vast oceans, goes back to telegraph wires and then undersea cables in the 1800s and wireless communications on ships in the early 1900s.

Fast forward about 90 years (and skipping over the heyday of London's Baltic Exchange and New York's Whitehall, Harbor View and Downtown Athletic Clubs) to the Web 1.0 era of 1997 – 2001. Business applications advanced greatly when the highly successful ShipServe and INTTRA business "portals," automating vessel purchasing and liner bookings/back office, respectively, were born. Software providers such as Veson Nautical and Softmar used advanced network architectures to allow information-sharing across businesses, geographies and time zones.

But social networking, as opposed to business applications, continued throughout Web 1.0 the old-fashioned way, although Web sites and emails chains greatly improved the ability of maritime organizations to broadcast (one to many) outward. Specialized discussion boards emerged, but industry fragmentation defeated efforts to create online communities (many to many) of scale. If anything, the action shifted to different venues. Tom Roberts, a Partner at ship sales broker Compass Maritime Services and President of the Association of Ship Brokers and Agents (ASBA), told Maritime Executive: "I think the big conferences – like Jim Lawrence's Marine Money and the Connecticut Maritime Association (CMA) – serve the same purpose as the old lunch clubs. They're places where high-level executives can gather and network."

Now it's 2011, with a new generation of Web 2.0 businesses with real revenues. What's different? LinkedIn's blockbuster IPO in mid-May raised \$330 million and valued the company at \$4.5 billion; its market capitalization shot upwards and held steady at around \$8.9 billion. Skype (a VOIP provider bought by Microsoft for \$8.5

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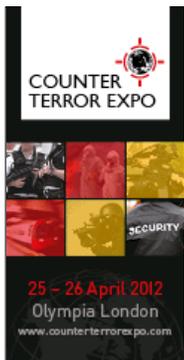
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billion, also in May) is now partnering with the biggest player in the space, Facebook (thought to be worth \$50 billion) on video-conferencing applications.

A New Way of Doing Business?

All of this newfound activity begs the question of whether "social media" offer anything useful for executives and decision-makers from the shipping industry. Deals are created and relationships fostered by professionals who congregate at gatherings organized by groups like the CMA, ASBA and even the revitalized Propeller Club. The Baltic Exchange has gone online with Baltex, an online trading network for "swaps" on freight. But Baltex is really a business facilitator, not a social network.

Late last year ASBA, which was founded in 1934, created its "Young Shipbrokers and Agents" arm with a mission of bringing together a younger generation of people in the business. Its social events have been complemented by a robust Facebook page. In the words of ASBA's Roberts, "Younger people are quite comfortable moving their social lives online. Just like the older generation, socializing plays a big role in the maritime business. But it's a different form of socializing, one which the younger people in the business are quite comfortable with. The owners go online because that's where the charterers are. The agents go on because they find principals there."

Indeed they do. I found 97 members on the group's Facebook page. Not to be outdone, the New York Chapter of the Young Shipping Professionals (YSP) group boasts 254 members. YSP's mission statement on its Facebook page says it all: "We are a like-minded club formed of young, smart and social people that love the industry and appreciate that interpersonal networks are its foundation." A YSP page from a sister organization in Greece reveals a roster of nearly 500 members.

Laura Kowalczyk, a founding member of YSP's New York Chapter (YSPNY), emphasized that shipping is a transient business where people around the globe "all know each other." A case in point is YoungShip Singapore, started by a 20-something ex-pat from Connecticut. It builds on a networking site called YoungShip, which started out of Oslo and is active on Linked-In. Kowalczyk said that business is no longer just 9 to 5. With numerous demands on everyone's time, "Online social networks let you easily identify potential business connections within your social circle."

Many shipping people give LinkedIn high marks, albeit for facilitation of social interactions and connections rather than for any type of electronic commerce. I was sold on it several years ago when a LinkedIn lookup resulted in good article quotes and an ongoing friendship with the CFO of a major European shipping company. The sale has been reinforced over and over again as real life and cyber contacts meld together. The Maritime Executive has carved out a busy corner of cyber real estate on the network with excellent online discussions where traffic moves in multiple directions (a real community, in contrast to one-way broadcast traffic) and resembles real-life gatherings, which shipping people crave. With more than 13,000 members, content in Maritime Executive's slice of LinkedIn complements the print magazine, achieving visibility comparable to that of major maritime media. Recently, LinkedIn added new functionalities to organize contacts and streamline communication with people who are one or two steps removed from primary contacts.

Carolina Salguero, the Founder of PortSide New York, an organization seeking to show New York City how to better utilize its waterfront, told Maritime Executive: "We are looking at ways to use LinkedIn as a means of more than maritime networking." Salguero, whose office is aboard an old harbor tanker, the Mary A. Whalen, described postings that led to contacts with a naval architect and an oil company executive, both offering expertise that PortSide will call upon in the future.

B2B and Social Media: Partners in Progress

Social media, by virtue of its huge reach, frequently intersects with the maritime business; and for those organizations which deal with individuals, its role will likely grow. Carleen Lyden-Kluss of Morgan Marketing & Communications, whose clients include law firms and organizations with a maritime specialization, explained, "Shipping is business to business, or B2B. Facebook is better for reaching individuals." But like businesses selling soap or beer, one metric of success for maritime organizations is the ability to engage their members. Consumer-facing businesses benefit from any communication channel that might enable them to better touch millions of non-experts (who are, by definition, scattered broadly about). PortSide's Salguero added, "For us, it's about contact and follow-up with our target groups."

In contrast to a consumer-facing group such as PortSide, the maritime B2B venue (which includes ship chartering, supplies and provisioning, and numerous

operational and technical services) already has a well-established infrastructure for linking buyers and sellers who are in the market on a steady basis. But this infrastructure is supported by social interactions which are no longer restricted to face-to-face encounters. That's the big change. The CMA (where the membership roster includes individuals and not corporations) holds monthly luncheons, special events and its big annual confab in late March. It also uses Facebook and LinkedIn, in addition to its Web site and email lists, to publicize upcoming events and reprise past gatherings through a photo section.

The old industry directories and business card Rolodexes (including brokers' home phone number lists once published by ASBA) have been supplanted to some extent by rosters of Facebook friends or LinkedIn contacts. Social media now complements traditional marketing media. For example, ShipServe uses LinkedIn to publicize its specialist advertising network for ship supplies, which extends backward to the very traditional Mariners Guide in print and on CD-Rom (a 1990s innovation).

ASBA's Roberts said he'd only recently begun to explore LinkedIn. Initially, he saw a heavy focus on job-hunting and commented: "I have used a system for keeping track of people that is made up of more than 25 loose-leaf notebooks that include each contact's business card, press clippings, photos, and hand-written notes. It's old-fashioned, but it's been effective for me over the years." YSPNY's Kowalczyk emphasized that LinkedIn is an appropriate forum for a professional discussion, more so than Facebook, which she said was an excellent venue for getting to know people without the pressure of a pure business situation. She also stressed LinkedIn's value to job-hunters and recruiters alike, recounting various anecdotes of introductions made through the network.

Morgan Marketing's Lyden-Kluss talked to Maritime Executive specifically about the activities of one client, the North American Marine Environmental Protection Association, or NAMEPA, whose mission is to educate port communities, seafarers and students about the importance of the oceans as a global resource. She noted that "Outreach to seafarers and students is a big part of our job at NAMEPA. Since both groups are heavily involved with social media, we decided to develop a Facebook presence in order to reach them more effectively."

The Possibilities Are Endless

The new media are also useful for another form of outreach – fundraising. PortSide's Salguero described a fundraising effort with a networking application called Crowdrise. Salguero brought up another important issue for maritime organization working through multiple social media platforms, telling Maritime Executive: "It takes a lot of work to keep the content aligned and consistent across platforms. To facilitate matters we've been working with a relatively new application called ifttt, which stands for 'If This, Then That.'" The application seeks to centralize forwarding and reposting of content. PortSide is also experimenting with Twitter to increase visibility in target demographics and with YouTube to use videos to better explain its programs.

The future leaders of the maritime business are members of groups like YSP and are likely using applications like IMOS (a suite of ship management tools from Veson Nautical) in their daily routines. As their careers advance, inventive professionals will find ways to further connect with other members of the shipping "club" while infusing their social lives deeply into their business lives. As the two continue to blur, Facebook, LinkedIn and whatever networks come next – or whatever fusions of social features with business applications emerge – will all play an important role in shipping's constantly changing seascape. In today's world, it's more important than ever to be "linked in."

– *MarEx*

Barry Parker is a frequent contributor to the magazine.

Making the Connection

In the course of writing this article I did the following:

- Reconnected, through LinkedIn, with a person I did business with in London, circa 1987- 1988. He now lives in Australia and has transitioned from drybulk freight to the wind power business.
- Arranged an interview via Facebook. It was conducted over the phone via Skype, but the initial contact and the logistics of when to call, what number to use, etc., were all done through Facebook.
- Joined LinkedIn groups dealing with offshore drilling and Arctic shipping, two areas of professional and writing interest.
- Through the Facebook posting of a Norwegian rig worker, I became aware of a transaction that will figure prominently in an article I am writing re

offshore energy.

- Barry Parker

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