

Celebrities are tweeting, newspapers report on blogs, and sometimes the only way you can “talk” to your children is on their Facebook walls. But what does all of this electronic chatter have to do with selling a home? *Big Builder magazine*<sup>3</sup> surveyed industry professionals to determine how they are integrating online tools into their marketing strategies. Their findings correlate with other national surveys and support the buzz about sites such as Ning, Twitter, Facebook, and others. With reduced marketing budgets, many companies, including home builders, are turning to social media to bridge the gap between their product and their potential customers, as the following responses demonstrate.

- 60% said they were active in the social media sphere.
- 34.3% said they were considering becoming active.
- Facebook and Twitter were the most popular sites among builder respondents (85.7%).
- Other popular platforms included LinkedIn (80%), blogs (45.7%), and Craigslist (37.1%).
- 82.9% of respondents said that their primary reason for social networking was to increase brand recognition.
- 66.7% were using social networking to drive traffic and sales.
- 66.7% were using social networking to generate sales leads.

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***Social media is the set of Internet tools that allow for interaction and conversations between users. These tools include blogs, wikis, forums, videos, social bookmarking, and social networking, among others. Unlike early Web sites, which were static like a brochure, social media sites are interactive and encourage users to converse, opine, and lend expertise. They encourage users to add original content.***

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Following are some examples of builders and others in the industry who have embraced blogging and have created an extensive presence or brand through social media:

- The Bowen Family Homes blog (<http://www.BowenFamilyHomesBlog.com>) is a top referral source for this Atlanta-based builder's Web site. It is clean, well-designed, easy to navigate, and serves as a great source of community and company news.
- Highland Homes' blog (<http://www.HighlandHomes.org/news>) integrates seamlessly into the Highland Homes Web site as its news section. This provides for a great user experience on this Lakeland, Florida-based builder's Web site.
- The Sterling Custom Homes blog (<http://www.SterlingCustomHomes-Blog.com>) links this Austin, Texas-based builder's entire social media presence together with prominent buttons for its other sites placed on this custom-themed blog.
- Heron Bay Golf and Country Club's blog (<http://www.HeronBayBlog.com>), launched in July 2007, may be one of the first developer blogs to emerge. Minerva Properties of Atlanta owns the blog and country club, located in Locust Grove, Georgia. The blog has attracted many visitors—as many as 450 views to a single blog post.
- Lennar Homes (<http://theopendoorblog.com/>) cohesively compiles a large number of social media sites on a social media tab. This Miami-headquartered builder operates in 17 states. Builders with several communities or divisions follow this approach to present a comprehensive view of the company to consumers.

### Who Uses Social Media?

Social media platforms have received broad acceptance across demographic groups, including baby boomers, women, Gen X, and of course, Gen Y.

#### **Baby Boomers**

Older baby boomers (over age 55) exploded onto Facebook in early 2009, with a 513% increase in usage, according to iStrategylabs<sup>4</sup>. Social media is now widely accepted by the larger generational group of boomers (ages 44–61) too. A survey of that group<sup>5</sup> found

- 41% of baby boomers have visited social networks, such as Myspace or Facebook.
- 61% have been to sites with streaming or downloadable video.
- More than 57% of Web users overall have stopped at social networking sites in the past three months.

### Women

Women have embraced social media for networking and opinion sharing even more than the general population. Social networking provides a conduit to reach old friends and make new acquaintances. An April 2009 poll<sup>6</sup> of women who participated in any social media activity weekly or more (about half of the sample used social media daily), found

- 75% participated in social networks, 55% were active in some form of blogging, and 20% used Twitter. The women reported spending less time following mass media, including television, newspapers, magazines, and radio, than previously.
- 75% used social media platforms such as Facebook and Myspace to communicate with friends and family and to share family photos, plan outings with the girls, and just “talk.”

A separate study by Forrester Research<sup>7</sup> in June 2008 focused on empowered women ages 25–54—women considered decision makers in their homes and sources of recommendations by their friends. Forty-two percent reported using social media platforms compared with 33% of all U.S. online adults. They said the Internet helped them manage their family life.

### Gen Y

Dan Schawbel, author of *Me 2.0: Build a Powerful Brand to Achieve Career Success* and owner of Mashable: The Social Media Guide online says “Gen Y was raised on technology. They have always had e-mail and the ability to text. Their cell phones are extensions of their hands. They use them to text message, instant message (IM) and check their Facebook page. There are many different ways to interact with Gen Y, but you’ll find most of them are already on Facebook<sup>8</sup>.”

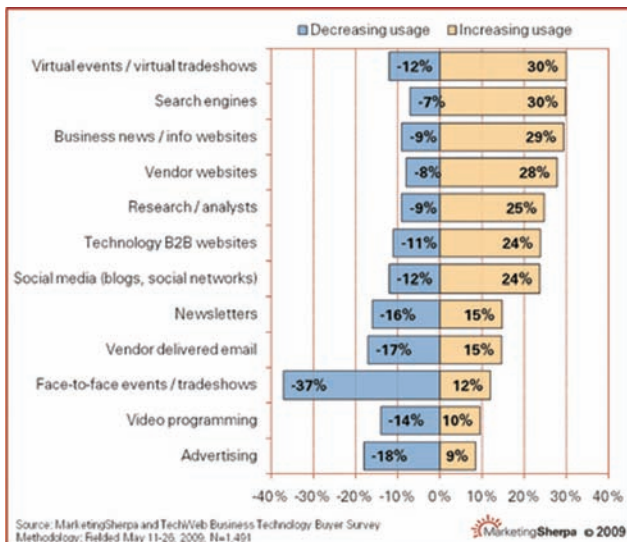
## Social Media for Home Builders

However, don't think that social media is a one-stop shop to reach Gen Y. There is a group within this generation known as the *refuseniks* that chooses to remain off the social networking grid. These age 20-to-early-30s high-functioning adults, who prefer privacy and face-to-face communications, generally have less education and disposable income than their peers who have chosen to embrace social media. Social networkers are more likely to have an annual income of \$75,000 or more, than nonusers. The latter group is more likely to have only a high school education<sup>9</sup>.

The fastest growing age group on Twitter is youths and young adults (ages 12–24). Facebook claims more than 350 million active users<sup>10</sup>.

Online networking, blogging, and tweeting have changed the buying process (fig. 1.1): search engines, Web sites, and blogs are leading the way for businesses to promote and consumers to find and purchase big-ticket items costing \$25,000 or more<sup>11</sup>.

**Figure 1.1** Internet purchasing habits



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