

## Experts: Business owners need social media

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**S**tartups usually depend on word-of-mouth to get business, usually because there's no money in the till to buy advertising.

In an economy sliding toward recession, there's probably going to be even less money, which makes social media tools all the more necessary, according to serial entrepreneurs and those who have helped startups.

"You have to embrace the conversation, because it's going on with or without you," said Chris Pirillo, a former television host on TechTV who now hosts his life on a variety of sites, as well as contributing video to CNN.com and other players.

"As an entrepreneur, it's essential to find support in the community and that community is likely not going to beat a path to your doorstep," he said. "You have to beat a path to theirs."

Pirillo will be one of the speakers at the Arizona Entrepreneurship Conference on Nov. 19 in Tempe.

Social media, also known as Web 2.0, is the concept of networking using a variety of Web portals. In business, options include LinkedIn.com and Twitter.com. The latter limits messages to 140 characters or less, about the equivalent of a cell phone text message, giving entrepreneurs the perfect opportunity to craft their words carefully.

Lon Safko, a Valley entrepreneur who has started nine companies and is at work writing the "Social Media Bible," said social media offers entrepreneurs and startups a distinct advantage their predecessors didn't have just a few years ago: free access to a potentially unlimited market.

"Nobody can afford to run a business without using the Internet and social media," Safko said.

Social media takes various forms. It can be a Facebook or MySpace page. It can be a LinkedIn

profile. It can use numerous sites to market and make contacts. The best part, Safko said, is it's all virtually free.

"Almost everything is free, and almost everything is easy," he said. "The biggest challenge is, where do you start?"

The key for entrepreneurs is time. Safko said they need to start slowly, learning about one new social media tool at a time and discovering which ones work and which ones don't.

Chris Johnson, founder and managing partner of Terralever LLC, said social networking and media have become key for companies of all sizes.

The Tempe-based interactive marketing agency has done brand work for Red Bull, BMW and a host of smaller companies.

Getting involved in the online community is the first step toward raising awareness about a company's brand, Johnson said.

"There's already a group talking about your brand; it's just whether you want to be part of the conversation," he said.

Building a social network also is something entrepreneurs, or anyone looking to establish a network, must do themselves. While the contacts exist online, the relationships built through them can be real and long-lasting from both a positive and negative aspect, Johnson said.

"It's difficult to hand that off to someone else," he said.

While the rest of the business world seems to be catching on to various social media tools, entrepreneurs tend to be early adopters, primarily because they take risks in their work and are more inclined to do so in promoting their business, Safko said.

"That type of person tends to be exploratory," he said.