

# Marketing That's Really, Really Local

*New forms of hyperlocal media can help you connect with your community.*

By Mark Wright

As newspapers and mass media outlets around the U.S. struggle with bleeding budgets and shrinking circulation, new opportunities are emerging for locally-focused communication platforms like neighborhood blogs and community news websites. This trend—sometimes described as “hyperlocal news,” “placeblogging” or “citizen journalism”—holds the potential to help businesses that are eager to engage customers and prospects virtually in their own backyards.

At their best and most professional, hyperlocal media can serve as compelling communication vehicles for reaching out on a community or neighborhood level. Self storage facilities can leverage such platforms to engage with renters and homeowners using highly-targeted messages.

While volunteer-run neighborhood blogs have been around for awhile, serious media companies have jumped on the hyperlocal trend to experiment with new business models for delivering content and connecting with audiences on a more personal level.

The results, so far, can be seen in the form of websites like Chicago-based EveryBlock.com (which was bought by msnbc.com); Outside.in (supported by a group of investors that includes CNN); and New York-based Patch.com (acquired by AOL). Seattle-based Fisher Communications, Inc. launched several dozen hyperlocal blogs in Washington and Oregon, while another Seattle-based firm, Instivate, is beta testing its Neighborlogs.com community blogging platform.

## Why This Matters to Your Business

All of that may be more than you wanted to know. But any company seeking new avenues to customer attraction and engagement can barely afford to ignore this trend. Because, in addition to serving as new advertising platforms, hyperlocal media are hungry for content—which any savvy marketer knows is an opportunity to generate



free publicity, albeit in an appropriate and tactful manner (i.e., avoiding hype and offering relevant, valuable information to the audience).

Whether you run a single storage facility or a REIT, going very, very local with your marketing and public relations is increasingly becoming very, very easy. OK, let's assume the REITs have people on staff who already know all about this. The point is: your company size doesn't matter. You can leverage these proliferating online platforms for your operation even as a mom-and-pop, solo facility, since by definition hyperlocal outreach is meant to target a fairly small geographic area.

## Finding the Right Hyperlocal Media for You

Maybe you want visibility across an entire city or county, or maybe a few key neighborhoods fitting your preferred demographic profile will work best. Hyperlocal news platforms are themselves experimental—so a willingness to test different approaches, along with detailed knowledge of your local market, will help you get started.

In addition to the sites mentioned above, make a stop at your favorite search engine and enter keywords like “neighborhood news (plus your city name or ZIP Code).” Local TV and radio stations, and of course newspapers, will often now have their own community-specific blogs or links to others in the area.

The commercial platforms (EveryBlock, Patch, et al.) will have information about advertising opportunities easily visible on their sites. Grassroots, volunteer-edited commu-

nity blogs, however, will range from fairly professional to—let’s use a polite word here—quirky.

Some of the fairly professional variety will seek advertisers, while some will not. Likewise, some will be open to outside content—“guest posts” (i.e., articles), news releases, photos, videos and the like—while others will not. As for “quirky” or homegrown sites, the suggestions in the next paragraph apply doubly. (Grassroots sites can also devolve into Web-based megaphones for NIMBY naysayers—so some selectivity about which sites to cultivate would be prudent.)

The goal: Determine how you can best partner with these 21st century media outlets/community forums in order to build a mutually-beneficial, two-way conversation with folks who will—over time—remember you and think of your storage facility as a valued part of that community. That, in turn, will support word-of-mouth referrals.

### Choose Carefully

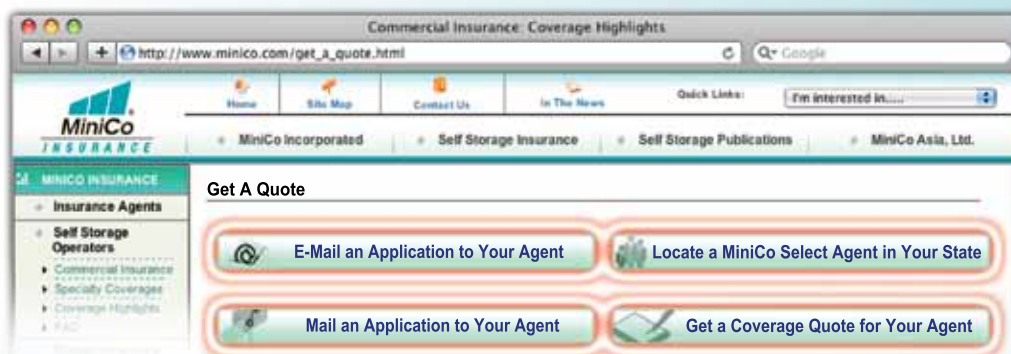
Exercise caution before letting your company name appear in any form on any site, of course. Remember that to a certain extent you are associating your brand (which is invaluable to you) with the site’s brand (over which you have no control) in the eyes of the audience. So, you want to make sure the “fit” is right between your facility’s image and that of the website.

Click around the entire site until you know it very well. Monitor the articles, comments, ads (if it has any) and other content carefully over a period of weeks. Choose only those sites that reach the specific audience with which you want to engage. Try to find out what that audience thinks of the site.

As you familiarize yourself with a site, you will discover whether you need to speak with someone on its advertising or editorial staff (if it has one), or use automated features on the site to purchase an ad or post an article or a comment. The commercially-operated community sites, which presumably prefer professional-grade content, will usually give clear guidance about those details. Volunteer-run sites will likely require more vetting on your part, perhaps with a friendly email inquiry to the person listed as a key contact.

Regardless of how sophisticated (or not) the site appears to be, keep in mind that you will be acting as your own “publicity agent” or “community ambassador”—so you will want to be positive, polite and professional in reaching out to the contact person. You are beginning what could become a long-term relationship with a “neighborhood media institution.” By taking it slow and learning the best ways for you to contribute—advertiser, article writer, community news source—you will be on the cutting edge of a powerful media trend that could draw you closer to your prospective customers. ❖

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