

All atwitter about Tweets: School districts, towns get word out

Thursday, May 21, 2009

By Mary Niederberger and Maria Sciallo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Do you Twitter? There's a big, wide world of techno-savvy people out there who wish you would.

The virtual community is abuzz over the "next big thing," which, actually, already has arrived. Consider this service the modern-day equivalent of the town crier, who stood on a corner shouting "Extra, extra, read all about it!"

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#### Discuss this issue

Should school districts and towns communicate with Twitter? Visit our [community forum and share your comments about this issue.](#)

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The short, 140-character messages sent through Twitter are known as Tweets, and they're as immediate as instant messaging or a Facebook update, without depending on the Internet.

Although Tweets can be delivered via e-mail and appear on the Twitter Web site, they're most effective when delivered to cell phones or personal digital assistants, known as PDAs.

"At first, I wasn't crazy about it," said Laura Thomson, spokeswoman for the South Allegheny School District, which is part of a small but rapidly growing number of school districts and towns using Twitter.

Tweets are available to anyone who subscribes to a particular Twitter account.

Maria Borkowski, South Allegheny's director of technology, suggested the district use Twitter to update parents on school happenings.

"I told [Mrs. Borkowski] that all our district information is on our Web site. But then she told me that people don't want to go to the information, they want it to come to them," Ms. Thomson said.

Twitter's Web site describes itself as such: "Twitter is a service for friends, family and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?"

The answer can be helpful. For example, when a water main break temporarily closed a Mt. Lebanon school, Cissy Bowman, district director of communications, sent a Tweet to alert residents.

"It's the immediacy of it that is unique," Ms. Bowman said. She was able to attach a photo of the water main break so that anyone who received the information could see that it was outside the building and had not caused major damage.

Information on Tweets also can be more far-reaching.

In January, Florida resident Janis Krums was in New York City when US Airways Flight 1549 made an emergency landing in the Hudson River.

He snapped a shot of the plane and posted it to his online Twitter blog: "There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy."

Of course, many people who have Twitter accounts keep up running commentaries on mundane subjects. Your cousin might tell you she just had chicken for lunch, which is not as interesting as, say, singer John Mayer's obsessive postings about his life.

Those who sign up for Twitter pick and choose which accounts they want to follow, and a surprising number of everyday folks find themselves with an unexpected number of people following them.

On a more practical level, Twitter appears to be a good, cheap option for school districts and communities to get the word out quickly on everything from snow delays to upcoming holiday events.

"When the idea of Twitter popped up, we thought we'd just try it. After all, it doesn't cost anything," said Laura Pace Lilley, senior editor for Mt. Lebanon Magazine.

The magazine, which also serves as the public relations arm of the municipality, established itself on Facebook when editor-in-chief Susan Morgans created an account several years ago.

Many organizations already have mass communication systems in place. This year, Mt. Lebanon launched LeboALERT, which provides useful information via recorded telephone messages. Twitter, Ms. Lilley said, is just a quick supplement.

"If I have a message that First Friday is coming up, I can use that to drive people to our Web site, where they'll find more information," she said, referring to Mt. Lebanon's summer entertainment program.

But as a representative of the municipal government, she added, it's important that Tweets maintain a certain level of professionalism: "You don't want to be immature and sound like a 15-year-old out there."

"[Casual] is fine if you're selling electronics or jeans or pajamas. But I think people realize we're tied to the police department and the fire department."

When Mt. Lebanon's girls' basketball team won the PIAA championship this year, it would have been the perfect occasion to Tweet the news.

But the system was not yet up and running. Theoretically, Ms. Bowman said, she would have sent out a photo of the team's celebration: "It's almost like being there."

On an everyday basis, the school district's Tweets have included announcements about flu updates and resources, the date and time of an architect's update on the high school renovation project, as well as honors presented to staff and students.

The Mt. Lebanon Twitter account has about 48 followers.

The North Hills School District is just starting to Twitter, according to public information coordinator Tina Vojtko. The first Tweet was sent April 1 and about 108 followers receive an average of one Tweet a day.

"By using Twitter, I am able to hand-deliver information that you need, rather than relying on you to come to our Web site," Ms. Vojtko said.

"So now maybe I give you the first line of an article, and then you go to the link to read more."

Moon Area Superintendent Donna Milanovich suggested in March that the district use Twitter. "It's just another tool for us to be able to get the information out there," said Amanda Hartle, district public relations officer.

Much of the information has been routine -- meeting dates, awards -- but the district also used Twitter to inform followers about a recent bomb threat.

Mrs. Hartle said she envisions using Twitter for weather-related school closings next year. So far, the Moon account has about 80 followers, but she said she hopes that number has been climbing as publicity about the service increases.

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# A Very Long List of Web 2.0 Resources

*Evelyn McCormack*  
*NSPRA 2009*

Online Document Sharing:

[Google Docs](#)

[Scribus](#)

[Writewith.com](#) (group writing/editing)

[Piconote](#) -- online note-taking

[Helipad](#) -- online document and notes tool

[Writewith](#) -- cooperative document editing

Newsletter Creation & Tools:

[Letterpop](#) (create newsletters for free. A bit clunky.)

[Issuu](#) (free-post any print document, email, embed, etc.)

Photo Editing:

[Snipshot](#) (edit your photos online/alternative to Photoshop)

[FixRedEyes](#) -- fix red eye on photos online

Wikis:

[Wetpaint Wikis](#)

[Wikispaces](#)

Blog Platforms:

[Wordpress](#)

[Blogger](#)

[Edublogs](#)

Organization:

[30 Boxes](#) (online calendar)

[Remember the Milk](#) (online to-do list and tasks amangement)

[Evernote](#) (clipping favorite websites and saving online)

Writing:

[Save the Words](#) -- Vocabulary builder

[FreeDictionary](#)

[Gramlee](#) (site that checks your grammar--not free)

Twitter tools:

Hashtags

[Grouptweet](#) -- sent private messages to specific groups using Twitter

[Mytweetmap](#) -- shows where your tweets are coming from on a map

[Twitter Search](#) -- search for terms and people on Twitter

[Twitpic](#) -- Allows you to post photo links on Twitter

Miscellaneous Web 2.0:

[VisualCV](#) – Create a visual resume online

[The Common Craft Show](#) (video how-tos)

[Great explanation of Nings](#) by a Boston teacher

[Walled Garden](#) -- wiki about setting up Web 2.0 apps on school district servers

[A-Z Glossary](#) of Web 2.0 Terms

[Slideshare](#)

[NSPRA Facebook Page](#)

[Kansas State University's Mediated Cultures Website](#)

[BigThink](#)

[eSchoolNews Educator Resource Centers](#)

[Go 2 Web 2.0](#) – great resource

# NSPRA This Week – Tip of the Week

## April 14, 2009

### Using the Ning Platform to Create Networks

The Ning Platform enables Internet users to create their own social networks. Nings can be created for any type of group imaginable, including alumni groups, school groups, faculties, departments, families, and more. According to the Ning Web site ([www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com)), anyone can sign up to create, discover, or join social networks using the Ning Platform.

When you create a social network on Ning, it is free by default and runs ads that Ning controls. Once created, the Ning can be used to share best practices, links, photos, videos and other information. Generally, the success of a Ning depends entirely on its members and how they use it. For educators, Nings have become an increasingly popular way to network with other people and groups who share similar interests with you and your school district. Here are a few examples of how school districts can use Nings:

- School PR professionals can use a Ning site to share publications and news items about a school district with anyone who signs up as a member (parents, students, staff).
- School district administrative and leadership teams can work together and communicate via a Ning and avoid having to use long email lists and attachments to share information.
- PTAs can create Nings to connect **its** members.
- Teachers can create Nings for their departments, their schools, their districts, or for fellow teachers around the country to share curriculum materials, teaching tips and tactics, or other information.

Nings can be used for small niche networks (teachers within a department, for example) or in a larger way (state or regional public relations professionals). You can set the privacy level, restricting membership by invitation only or keeping it open to anyone who wants to join. Free Ning tools include discussion forums, chats, video sharing, photo sharing, link sharing, and more. You can also set the frequency with which you'll receive updates from your Ning groups. The Ning Premium service, at \$19.95 a month, allows you to point your Ning to a domain name and to add or delete advertising, among other details. But the free service fits most groups well.

In New York's Hudson Valley region, members of the New York NSPRA chapter (NYSPRA) created a group Ning for school PR professionals where they can share best practices and put their collective brain trust together on such topics as the local press, school budget challenges, and upcoming meetings. They've also created several subgroups within the Ning, including one on using technology.

Here are links to the Hudson Valley PR Ning and other sample Nings on the web:

- **The HudSPRA Network** (Created for school PR pros in the Hudson Valley region: <http://hudspra.ning.com>)
- **Classroom 2.0** (A professional development Ning for teachers): <http://www.classroom20.com>
- **PR Open Mic** (A Ning for PR students, faculty members and practitioners: <http://www.propenmic.org>)
- **The Hurricane Information Center** (a Ning for individuals interested in hurricane updates): <http://gustav08.ning.com>

Thousands of alumni group Nings are already online. Some are affiliated with schools, districts, colleges, and universities, but most have been created solely by graduates as a way to reconnect. Here are some examples:

- **Clarion Area HS Alumni Network** (An Alumni Ning not affiliated the with school or district):  
<http://clarionarea.ning.com>
- **Lindblom Eagles Alumni** (An Alumni Ning not affiliated with the school or district):  
<http://lindblom.ning.com>
- **Brookline HS Alumni Network** (An Alumni Ning affiliated with the district's alumni association):  
<http://brooklinehigh.ning.com>

Some unaffiliated alumni sites are well-managed by volunteer grads with stated “rules” for posting photos and comments, and a professional look. But others are not. You can find out if your schools or districts have unaffiliated alumni group Nings by searching the Ning site. It may be useful to view open groups in order to find graduates to highlight in publications or to learn more about the groups themselves. And you may even find your own high school or college groups online as well.

The best way to learn about Nings is to join one or start one. Explore the Ning site for groups that may interest you, or create a Ning for your own personal or professional group.

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*Source: Evelyn McCormack, Public Information Coordinator, Southern Westchester BOCES, Rye Brook, N.Y.; emccormack@swboces.org; and Carol Mowen, NSPRA Consultant, cmowen@nspra.org.*

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National School Public Relations Association, please visit [www.nspr.org](http://www.nspr.org).  
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# web 2.0 tools

## MGD 5.0 10012

### Tech Tools

1. [Photo & Video Sharing](#)
2. [Social Networking](#)
3. [Bookmarks](#)
4. [Office Tools](#)
5. [Photo Editors](#)
6. [Picture Maker](#)
7. [Converters](#)
8. [Calendars](#)
9. [Internet Cut-Outs](#)
10. [Home Pages](#)
11. [Whiteboards](#)
12. [Online Diagram Makers](#)
13. [News Feeds](#)
14. [Geolocators](#)
15. [Blogs & Publishers](#)
16. [Wikis](#)

### Photo & Video Sharing

<a href="#">Flickr</a>	<a href="#">YouTube</a>	<a href="#">Tweet Photo</a>	<a href="#">Voice Thread</a>
<a href="#">Hulu</a>	<a href="#">Panoramio</a>	<a href="#">WebShots</a>	<a href="#">JayCut</a>

### Social Networking

<a href="#">Facebook</a>	<a href="#">MySpace</a>	<a href="#">Twitter</a>	<a href="#">bebo</a>
<a href="#">Ning</a>	<a href="#">Friendster</a>	<a href="#">Hi5</a>	<a href="#">Meebo</a>

### Bookmarks

<a href="#">Del.icio.us</a>	<a href="#">BackFlip</a>	<a href="#">Digg</a>	<a href="#">Diigo</a>
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### Office Tools

<a href="#">Google Docs</a> – wordprocessor, spreadsheet, presentation	<a href="#">ThinkFree</a>	<a href="#">Buzzword Acrobat</a>	<a href="#">gOffice</a>
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### Photo Editors

<a href="#">SnipShot</a>	<a href="#">Picnik</a>	<a href="#">Flickr Editor</a>	<a href="#">Glogster</a>
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### Picture Maker

[Kids Zone Graphs](#)[Art Pad](#)[Mosaic Maker](#)[Mosaic Generator](#)

### Converters

[Neevia Converter](#)[Media Converter](#)[File Converter](#)[PDF to HTML Converter](#)

### Calendar

[PDFCalendar](#)[Google Calendar](#)[World Calendar](#)[Famundo](#)

### Internet Cut-Outs

[Clipmarks](#)[Reddit](#)[Bloglines](#)[Stumble Upon](#)

### Home Pages

[Protopage](#)[NetVibes](#)[iGoogle](#)[YourMinis](#)

### Whiteboards

[Virtual WhiteBoard](#)[Vyew](#)[Wiki: Writeboard](#)[Imagination Cubed](#)[WiZiQ](#)[Yugma](#)[Adobe Connect Now](#)[EtherPad](#)

### Online Diagram Makers

[Gliffy](#)[Bubbl.us](#)[Mindomo](#)[Mind42](#)[MindMeister](#)[Mind Tools – Brainstorming](#)[Mind Map Brainstorming](#)[NCES Create a Graph](#)

### Graphic Utilities

[Maplib](#)[Montage-a-Google](#)[SlideShare](#)[Slide](#)

### News Feeds

<a href="#">Kiosko</a>	<a href="#">Newsmap</a>	<a href="#">Snippet</a>
<a href="#">BBC Mundo - A Fondo</a>	<a href="#">Google News</a>	

### Geolocation

<a href="#">Google Maps</a>	<a href="#">Gmaps Pedometer</a>	<a href="#">Google planimeter</a>
<a href="#">Your GMap</a>	<a href="#">Earthquakes In The Last Week</a>	<a href="#">Live Maps</a>

### Blogs & Publishers

<a href="#">Blogger</a>	<a href="#">Wordpress</a>	<a href="#">Scribd</a>
<a href="#">School Blogs</a>	<a href="#">Blogging Across the Curriculum</a>	<a href="#">What are School Blogs?</a>
<a href="#">Weblogg-Ed</a>	<a href="#">A Weblog Workshop</a>	<a href="#">Educational Blogger's Network</a>
<a href="#">Blogs in the Classroom</a>	<a href="#">An Introduction to Blogs and Blogging</a>	<a href="#">Top 7 Ways to Encourage Bloggers to Your Blog</a>
<a href="#">Anatomy of a Blog</a>	<a href="#">Blogging Basics</a>	<a href="#">Using Weblog Software to Post Your Webpages</a>
<a href="#">A Webquest: Blogs and RSS</a>	<a href="#">Blogging and RSS</a>	<a href="#">Blog Button Makers</a>
<a href="#">Blogs and Wikis</a>	<a href="#">Blogdigger: Search Engine for Blogs</a>	<a href="#">How to Use a Blog for Non-Diarists</a>
<a href="#">FAQs About Blogs</a>	<a href="#">Blogrolling</a>	<a href="#">How to Blog Safely</a>
<a href="#">Vlog, Vidblog, Vog</a>	<a href="#">What is a Vlog?</a>	<a href="#">Audioblog</a>
<a href="#">Blogger</a>	<a href="#">How to Set Up a Blog with Blogger</a>	<a href="#">Easy Journal</a>
<a href="#">Bloglines</a>	<a href="#">Using Bloglines as Your Web Aggregator</a>	<a href="#">eBloggy</a>
<a href="#">Xanga</a>	<a href="#">The Blogs</a>	<a href="#">Seo Blog</a>
<a href="#">My Blog Site</a>	<a href="#">tBlog</a>	<a href="#">Exploring the Use of Blogs in Higher Education</a>
<a href="#">Blog Express</a>	<a href="#">Pitas</a>	<a href="#">WordPress</a>
<a href="#">Blogigo</a>	<a href="#">Blog Easy</a>	<a href="#">HaloScan: Feedback Code for Blogs</a>
<a href="#">Top 7 Ways to Encourage Blog Readers</a>	<a href="#">Pedagogical Underpinnings of Blogs in the Classroom</a>	<a href="#">Awasu</a>
<a href="#">CSS Style for Blogs</a>	<a href="#">How To Start a Blog</a>	<a href="#">Greymatter: Weblog Software</a>
<a href="#">MindSay</a>	<a href="#">LiveJournal Blogging Tool</a>	<a href="#">The How To Index to Blogging</a>

<a href="#">WebCollaborator</a>	<a href="#">Getting Started with Blogger</a>	<a href="#">Blok</a>
<a href="#">Blog Drive</a>	<a href="#">Audio Blogger</a>	<a href="#">Writing with Weblogs</a>
<a href="#">Weblog Ethics and Etiquette Tips</a>	<a href="#">Blogmeister</a>	<a href="#">Buzz, Blogs and Beyond</a>
<a href="#">Blogs: A Disruptive Technology Coming of Age</a>	<a href="#">Using Trackback</a>	<a href="#">Education Weblogs</a>
<a href="#">The Daily Log</a>	<a href="#">Exploring the Use of Blogs in Higher Ed</a>	<a href="#">Class Weblogs</a>
<a href="#">Instructional Blogging</a>	<a href="#">Blogs in Education</a>	<a href="#">Educational Blogging</a>
<a href="#">How to Create a VodCast</a>	<a href="#">How to Use Writely as a Blogging Tool</a>	<a href="#">EduBlogs</a>

### Wikis

<a href="#">Wiki Bibliography</a>	<a href="#">Qwiki Wiki</a>	<a href="#">Ways to Use Wikis</a>
<a href="#">Free Wiki Hosting</a>	<a href="#">Seed Wiki Creation Site</a>	<a href="#">How to Start a Wiki</a>
<a href="#">Introduction to the Wiki</a>	<a href="#">Wiki Web</a>	<a href="#">Make a Wiki</a>
<a href="#">Wiki School Basic Course</a>	<a href="#">Wiki Cities</a>	<a href="#">Wiki Farms</a>
<a href="#">Making the Case for a Wiki</a>	<a href="#">Swiki</a>	<a href="#">Educational Wikis</a>
<a href="#">Wiki Spaces</a>	<a href="#">Wiki Engines</a>	<a href="#">Curriki</a>

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This site is dedicated to my students, past and present. Special thanks to my supporting husband and beautiful kids, to Ms. H and Ms. L for cheering me on.

## Twitter Tools

Evelyn McCormack, NYSSBA 2009

*Communicating in a Web 2.0 World*

### Desktop Applications for Twitter

[Twhirl](#) - allows monitoring of multiple accounts

[Snitter](#)

[Twiterrific](#)

[MadTwitter](#)

[Spaz](#)

### Powerful Twitter Organization Application

[Tweet Deck](#)

### Manage Multiple Twitter Accounts

[Splittweet](#)

### Twitter for Companies/Organizations

[CoTweet](#)

### Mozilla Firefox Plugins

[Twitbin](#)

[Twitterfox](#)

### Send Messages to Twitter using Voice

[Twitter Fone](#)

### Blackberry Client

[TwitterBerry](#)

### iPhone Twitter Apps

[Tweetie for iPhone](#)

[Twinkle for iPhone](#)

[Twitter for iPhone](#)

[Hahlo](#)

[Pocket Tweets](#)

### Twitter on any Mobile device

[Tiny Twitter](#) - phone needs java

[Twitter Mobile](#) - only go here on your phone

[iTweet](#)

[twibble](#)

### Twitter on Windows Mobile

[Pocket Twit](#)

**Send via eMail**

[Twittermail](#)

**Counter to show your Twitter followers**

[Twitter Counter](#)

**Un-follow Someone for Just a Few Days**

[Twitter Snooze](#)

**Find out who Stopped Following You and Why**

[Qwitter](#)

[Twitterless](#)

**Manage who Follows You and Who You Follow**

[Friend or Follow](#)

[Mr. Tweet](#) – Recommendations

**Top Twitter Lists**

[Twitter Counter Top 100 List](#)

[twInfluence Top 50 List](#)

**Visual Map of Twitter Posts**

[Twitter Vision](#)

**Monitor Twitter for Cities, Keywords & What's Hot**

[Tweet Grid](#) - monitor keywords

[Monitter](#) - monitor keywords

[Twitscoop](#)

[Flaptor Twitter Search](#) - search twitter for a keyword

[Twitspy](#) - monitor twitter public timeline in real time

[Tweetscan](#)

[CityTweets](#) - follow tweets by City

**Share Files, Pictures & Videos via Twitter**

[Tweetcube](#) - files

[Twitpic](#) - pics

[Visual Twitter](#) - pics

[Twixxer](#)

**Share Quotes and Bits from Webpages**

[Tweet All About It](#)

**Monitor Conversations**

[Tweet 2 Tweet](#)

## **Monitor Trends**

[Twist](#)

## **Setup Automatic Tweets**

[Tweet Later](#)

## **Autopost your Blog entries to Twitter**

[Twitterfeed](#)

## **Evaluate your Twitter Profile**

[Twitter Grader](#)

[Twitter Ratio](#)

[Tweet Value](#)

## **Twitter Statistics and Graphs for a Twitter Account**

[Tweetstats](#)

[Twitgraph](#)

## **Twitter Dictionary**

[Twittords](#)

*Courtesy, Brian Longest, [www.longest.com](http://www.longest.com)*

## **NYC school uses collaborative wikis to cut costs and save time**

**By Michael Morisy**

**SearchUnifiedCommunications.com**

Collaboration 2.0 doesn't mean breaking the bank. That's what one New York City school discovered when it replaced its old pencil-and-paper parent-teacher meeting scheduling with a collaborative wiki that lets teachers and parents efficiently work out schedules without endless phone calls, slips of paper disappearing on the way home, or last-minute confusion.

The Allen-Stevenson School, a private K-9 school in Manhattan, will be using [Wikispaces](#) for the third year come fall, and Steve Cohen, assistant upper school head, said he's delighted with the results so far.

"The only responses I've received are that it's great," Cohen said. Every semester, he creates a blank schedule for each teacher with times listed. Parents are then directed to the wiki, which also includes written instructions and a video explanation, where they can enter their names into an empty time slot without registering or having to use any unfamiliar systems.

The wikis have been successful enough that Allen-Stevenson has used them in other areas, both internal and external facing (internal wikis can be password protected on Wikispaces).

The wikis include everything from test scheduling (internal) to early dismissal information (external).

"Every document is always up to date, and updated in real time," Cohen said. "I used to have to compile it all and send out emails with updates. It's taken a lot of work off my hands so I have more time for important things, like the kids."

Because Allen-Stevenson is an educational institution, Wikispaces provides the service, which includes unlimited wikis, free of charge.

"We've saved lots of money," Cohen said. "But the real drag of using [expensive collaboration products] was you have these elaborate systems; parents had to get accounts; you had to give vendors the students' names; there was lots of work just to get it to work."

### **More on wikis and collaboration**

Video technology and [social](#)

[software can cut](#) employee training costs

[Web 2.0 enterprise tools are appearing](#), but the ROI must lead the way

With the Wikispaces, Cohen can just set the program up and have users do the work for him. Privacy concerns are minimal because the only publicly accessible information is the student's name and time of meeting, and if there were concerns about privacy due to special circumstances, Cohen said, he could take those appointments by phone and manually track them, as he does for the two or three families every year that do not

have access to a computer.

### Encouraging collaborative wiki uptake

Cohen also likes the project because it was a simple way for teachers to "get their toes wet" with collaborative technology with a shallow learning curve and a high return on investment. For the spring semester, he said, teachers would actually have to sit and field calls for scheduling parent-teacher appointments.

Demonstrating the value of collaborative technology, while teaching how to use it, is the hardest challenge in its adoption, said Zeus Kerravala, a Yankee Group analyst.

"The success depends more on the utilization of the tools than the tools themselves," Kerravala said. Keeping it simple and easy to access increases the chance of success.

It also doesn't hurt to take the carrot-and-stick approach. Kerravala suggested, for example, offering prizes or recognition for top wiki contributors.

Cohen had some suggestions for the "stick" approach.

"Make it necessary," he said. Much of the essential documentation for teachers is now on wikis at the school, but Cohen still fields requests for how to do this, or for hard copies of those forms. He regularly denies such requests and points the users to the appropriate wiki page.

"Our teachers use our wikis for things because that's where the stuff they need is," he said.

Surprisingly, the toughest audience for wiki adoption has been outside of school staff.

"Kids only use technology for the things they want to use it for," Cohen said. "They won't necessarily check the website for their homework."

So, after posting assignments on a wiki with mixed results, Allen-Stevenson is moving decidedly old school: They are putting a white board in the hall with all the assignments so that passing students cannot claim they didn't have access.

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"Make it necessary," he said. Much of the essential documentation for teachers is now on wikis at the school, but Cohen still fields requests for how to do this, or for hard copies of those forms. He regularly denies such requests and points the users to the appropriate wiki page.

"Our teachers use our wikis for things because that's where the stuff they need is," he said.

Surprisingly, the toughest audience for wiki adoption has been outside of school staff.

"Kids only use technology for the things they want to use it for," Cohen said. "They won't necessarily check the website for their homework."

So, after posting assignments on a wiki with mixed results, Allen-Stevenson is moving decidedly old school: They are putting a white board in the hall with all the assignments so that passing students cannot claim they didn't have access.

# Ning: The future of online social networking?

## Story Highlights

CNN talks to Gina Bianchini, CEO of Ning, a fast-growing Web site

Ning lets people with common interests gather around niche social networks

The site boasts more than 1 million social networks -- some 200,000 of them active

In March, the site added a real-time activity feed to help users stay updated

By Stephanie Chen

CNN


**(CNN)** -- Whether you're into baseball or backgammon, Harry Potter or heavy metal, Ning has an online network for you.

A fast-growing, free Web site launched two years ago, Ning lets members custom build their own social-networking platforms based around their passions and pastimes.

As [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) connect people to friends and family, Ning gathers users around common interests. The site hosts networks for hip-hop music lovers, video gaming moms and teens obsessed with the Twilight book and movie franchise. Other popular Ning networks bring people together online for political and social causes such as "Pickens' Plan," which advocates wind energy.

Ning had 4.7 million unique visitors as of January and surpassed 1 million social networks -- about one-fifth of them considered active -- last month.

Ning also enhanced its site in March with new features such as a real-time activity feed so users can get up-to-the-minute reports -- not unlike Twitter's tweets -- about what others are doing.

CNN spoke recently to Ning CEO Gina Bianchini, a Silicon Valley native and former Goldman Sachs analyst, about the company and the future of social networking.  [Watch Bianchini chat about Ning »](#)

**CNN:** Where did this idea for Ning come from?

**Bianchini:** We really started with a very simple premise. What if you gave people the opportunity to create their own social experiences for their own unique passions/topics/interest? We started on the ground floor to build it in such a way that it can be customized and programmed and made truly unique for each individual. I believe the most powerful ideas are the most simple.

**CNN:** What is the mission of Ning?

**Bianchini:** It's a way to get people to organize and get people to meet around their passions.

**CNN:** Did any specific Web sites or companies inspire you to create Ning?

**Bianchini:** We were really inspired by the first wave of [Internet](#) companies truly native to the Web like Craigslist and eBay. They were really about people connecting to other people. They were really about the Internet connecting people to each other. It's completely unique to the Internet -- you can't do it via television or newspapers.

**CNN:** Did you expect the idea of connecting people through common interests to be so successful?

**Bianchini:** Social behavior is really what people want to do online. It was clear for the rapid adoption of social networking in general that it is very much the case.

**CNN:** What are some of the interesting social networks on Ning?

**Bianchini:** There are 200,000 social networks active right now, and they are across tens of thousands of unique passions. There is a network called 'This is 50.' It's like a hip hop TMZ. Another is the 'Pickens' Plan.' It's a way they are organizing more than 200,000 people around wind-energy policy. There is another one for cricket, specifically Indian cricket, which has added half a million people in the last two and a half weeks. There is another about the Twilight saga for teens. So it ranges from 50 Cent to teens talking about Twilight to serious adults looking at how to make changes in government policy. That's the power of the Internet and the power of connecting people.

**CNN:** What do you attribute to the growth of Ning?

**Bianchini:** What's fundamental in the adoption of Ning is that people are unique. They have unique interest and passion and they like having a contact for that experience and for their identity.

**CNN:** What makes Ning different from other social-networking sites?

**Bianchini:** It's focused on providing the [means for] people to create new social networks around their interests and passions and connect new people around those passions. We think that's a very critical element of organization. The Facebook phenomenon connects you to people you already know and Twitter is amazing for news and real-time events. What we see with people

who gravitate to Ning is meeting new people with similar interests.

**CNN:** How can Ning be useful to organizations or corporations?

**Bianchini:** When you can bring people together around a common cause there is incredible potential to do fundraising and to organize volunteers.

**CNN:** How does your site make money?

**Bianchini:** If you want to add a feature like making your own domain, you can pay a la carte for options. On the free service there are ads contextual to what the network is.

**CNN:** What are your thoughts on the future of social networking?

**Bianchini:** Niche social networking sites are absolutely something people want to do. People clearly want to do this. . .[and] as people get more comfortable with social networking via Facebook, Twitter, they will look around and say, 'I want a social network for this particular group.'

**CNN:** What are some of your company's goals in the future?

**Bianchini:** We are really focused on making our service perfect for people who come to meet new people. We're growing really rapidly and we're seeing a lot of interest and new people joining social networks.

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