

A Yoga Teacher's Guide to Social Networking

Social networking sites offer teachers a venue to define and promote their work. Here's how to get started establishing an online presence.

By Sage Rountree



Opportunities for social networking online expand every day. As a teacher, you can reach students in ways that vary from creating a public listing on Yoga Alliance's site to building a network using Facebook, Twitter, or Yoga Journal's online community. These free networks offer powerful ways to reach and teach your audience of current and potential students. But you'll need to keep in mind the nature of the Web, considering what is appropriate content, how to interact with others, and exactly how your Web presence relates to your teaching.

Holly Brewer, marketing and communications manager at CorePower Yoga in Denver, sees social networks as an outgrowth of yoga's creation of community. "Yoga is so much about connectedness—mind, body, spirit, community, breath, movement," she says. "Social networking is a natural extension of this connectedness and community. Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and YouTube all represent niche communities of yoga students. By engaging in the conversations within these communities *authentically* we have more outlets to build relationships and awareness about yoga."

General Principles

Handle with care. While you'll need to post some details about yourself so that online readers can feel connected to you, be careful about what information you share. "Check privacy settings on your accounts and make sure they are set to your liking," suggests Tola Oguntoyinbo, CEO of Sonecast.net, a social media marketing company. "Remember that any audio, images, video, and text that you put online—depending on your account settings—may be viewed by anyone at any time." A rule of thumb: Don't post anything you wouldn't want your grandmother to see.

Concentrate on content. To use social networking to promote your business as a teacher, Oguntoyinbo recommends focusing on content. "Figure out ways to describe your business or

practice using audio, video, text, or images. Develop a plan to capture that media in such a way that it's easy for you," he suggests. This could mean creating a slide show depicting a sequence, writing an essay on a point of philosophy, or offering a brief guided meditation, perhaps as an MP3 file. Choose a medium that plays to your strengths and in which you enjoy working—create a blog post if you like writing, record a voice podcast if you're a good speaker. Focus on contributing engaging, useful content, and you'll quickly accumulate credibility and online connections.

Mind your manners. Remember to be polite in your online postings. Approach your content in a spirit of *seva*, or offering to your readers. Follow the *yamas* (restraints) of *ahimsa* (nonharming), *asteya* (nonstealing), and *parigraha* (nongrasping) by keeping your tone positive, by respecting and crediting others' intellectual property, and by cross-promoting your fellow teachers. For example, Twitter users "retweet" (repeat) useful content to foster a greater sense of community, giving full credit to the first person to post the information.

Tap into networks. Shannon Conway, owner of Bend Yoga in Bend, Oregon, has found products for her studio's retail offerings using the robust network of yogis on Twitter. Conway says that in addition to tapping social networks for "inspiration, connection, student recruitment, support, and product sourcing," social media offer "a relatable way for people to get to know Bend Yoga. If potential students hear about us from someone who is following us on Twitter, or they see our group on Facebook with comments from converts, they might swing over and take a look."

Take breaks. Sometimes, though, you'll need a break from the social networking scene. It's easy to spend a lot of time in front of the computer as you explore various sites. "You can get completely consumed with [networking]," says Maria "Puma" Reyes, owner of Puma Yoga in Lakewood, Ohio, who uses Twitter and LinkedIn to promote her studio. She recommends a balanced approach to the media: "I've learned a lot about social networking through Twitter and have met some really interesting people. But as a yoga teacher, studio owner, and wife, I have found that I need to be able to disconnect from networking and just enjoy *being* instead of *doing* too much."

Calculate your return. As with any marketing technique, you should keep your efforts consistent. Regularly evaluate whether you're seeing a return on the time you invest in social networks. This return could come in the form of seeing more students in class, or it could be that you find yourself learning more about yoga from your networks. If your networking begins to feel like drudgery, disable your account and move on.

Options for Social Networking

Your Web presence might be a one-way broadcast, as in a directory listing. It might position you as one voice in a conversation, as in group discussions. Or it can put you in a position of authority but invite conversation—the teacher-student model. Below are a few options for how and where to network online.

Directory Listings and Sites

A simple way to begin establishing a Web presence is to list yourself as a teacher on sites such as YogaFinder.com, Yoga.com, and the Yoga Alliance website. Such listings are free, offer easy registration, and will help students find you when they search for yoga in a given location. The goal is simple dissemination of information, so that those looking for a teacher or a class can find you.

Group Discussions

Online forums are nothing new; they've been around since the beginning of the Web. These forums include the very popular boards at the site Moving into Stillness, overseen by Erich Schiffmann. The lively discussion among more than 2,000 users has been going on since 2001.

More than 500 yoga-related groups exist on Facebook. Some are disjointed, full of empty marketing rhetoric; others contain robust discussions. Check out Yoga and Meditation, as well as the group I Love Yoga, affiliated with yoga.com and populated by more than 25,000 members.

Group discussions can be wonderful, especially for getting a question answered. These forums often showcase multiple views and opinions on a topic. But sifting through the volume of information can be difficult.

Teacher-Student Social Networking

In the teacher-student model, you establish yourself as an authority on a subject, whether through your profile, through serving as a group moderator, or through posting content on a subject. Students then have the opportunity to engage through comments or targeted small forums, asking questions and giving feedback.

Creating such a network could be as simple as creating a Facebook page for your business. If you go this route, consider your history on the site and sift through your own posted material to be sure you are projecting the image you would like to send. At the other end of the spectrum, studios can use platforms such as Ning.com or KickApps.com to create and customize their own interface, branding it and making it blend into an existing website.

Between the two extremes of simplicity and complexity is YogaTag.com, a free site designed to allow teachers to post a profile, schedule, and media while creating a community of colleagues and students. Art Santos, cocreator of YogaTag, explains that it is "a hybrid of many [social networking] systems. Our social network aspects connect people, but in their unique relationships as teachers and students. We've built tools specific to the unique context of yoga: yoga styles, yoga studios, yoga events, and yoga classes."

The benefit of any network lies in its use. Be sure to point your potential community members to the site by mentioning it in class, in your newsletter, and on your blog and website. Establish a vibrant online community, and you'll be serving your students in establishing connections—to yoga and to each other—beyond the studio.

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