

When Friends Become Clients

Many businesses are using Facebook to attract customers, ask for input.

Salsa Latina is a small restaurant on Central Avenue. Its paltry advertising budget will never compete with the national chains.

But on Facebook, Salsa Latina hangs with the big boys.

Many smaller businesses, in fact, are finding Facebook to be a great equalizer. The online service is free, so it allows even the smallest business to get online and start marketing itself.

Even better, every Facebook page looks essentially the same -- no matter the company size. And those pages don't take an army of tech-savvy technicians to maintain.

"It's free publicity," said Liliana Coraizaca, a manager at Salsa Latina, which opened in Albany two years ago. "When we're on Facebook, we're communicating with people who have never heard of us."

Facebook, of course, remains primarily an online social media site where "friends" keep each other updated on their lives and families. The site claims 400 million active users.

Yet many of those users are businesses, who use Facebook to update their friends and fans on specials and sales.

Are margaritas 30 percent cheaper on Mondays? Get that information on Facebook. Have a special event scheduled at the store? Put it on Facebook.

Clement Art, a frame shop and gallery in downtown Troy, uses Facebook to notify its customers of coming art shows.

"It's quick communication -- without having to address and stamp all those postcards," said coowner Tom Clement.

Big businesses use Facebook in much the same way. Price Chopper's page, which claims 30,000 fans, is lined with updates on specials and new store items.

But social media is unpredictable. Stewart's Shops, for example, has discovered many users of its Facebook page are company employees.

"On one level, it's an internal communication tool within the company," said Stewart's spokesman Tom Mailey.

Facebook is interactive, so most businesses on Facebook deal with occasional negative comments. Many just delete the posts; some use negative comments to improve customer service.

Paul Fahey, chief operating officer at Zone 5, an Albany marketing and communications firm, said too few businesses use Facebook to actually solicit opinion.

Why not use a network of Facebook friends, he asks, to find out how your service can be

improved?

"That's something that has a lot of value, but it's under-utilized," Fahey said.

Some businesses without Facebook pages find the site's users push them toward getting one.

The law firm Tully Rinckey established a Facebook page partly because so many of clients were contacting firm lawyers through the attorneys' personal Facebook accounts.

"The explosion of social media -- whether its Facebook or whether its Twitter -- is at a point where you can no longer ignore it as a law firm or as a business," said Matt Tully, founding partner at the firm.

Tully Rinckey has embraced social media to the point that it recently hired a social media coordinator. It believes it's the first Capital Region law firm to take that step.