

Utilizing social networking to extend the knowledge of a telecommunications consortium

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*“The Web is not longer about idly surfing and passively reading, listening, or watchin. It is about peering: sharing, socializing, collaborating, and most of all, creating within loosely connected communities.”* (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, chap. 2)

The Southeast Minnesota Network (SEMNET) is a relatively new broadband network, created in May 2007, and is comprised of approximately 16 school districts in Southeast Minnesota. Their mission is *“To build and maintain a world-class regional telecommunications collaborative in southeastern Minnesota”*. Their goals are to:

- Preserve, enhance, and expand learning opportunities through an advanced telecommunications infrastructure shared among members
- Examine and implement appropriate alternative deliveries of education through maximization of available and emerging technology and network applications
- Explore and deploy appropriate collaborative administrative and business systems as appropriate in support of educational administration
- Collaborate within the membership, other entities, and regions to maximize the value of SEMNET to their communities
- Actively promote SEMNET and recruit new membership (SEMNET, 2007)

For several years members of the district have been meeting on a regular basis and via face to face and video conferencing. They would also communicate via email and had some sharepoint Web space to store documents, news, and information related to the organization. The sharepoint Web space was on a private server and SEMNET leaders had little control of

adding new members to the site. Also, with little or no training in managing sharepoint, it was also very difficult to add new content and to streamline communication.

SEMNET needed to develop an online an online community to not only extend information and learning beyond the face to face meetings, but also to market and recruit new membership. The system needed to be easy enough for users who have very little or no training, to be able to participate and contribute to the site. It also needed to have multiple layers of user rights and have the ability to embed widgets and other third party applications. It needed to be highly collaborative and open, yet private in times, to hide discussions and information from the public.

“Ning is an online service that allows users to create their own social networks and join and participate in other networks. No technical skill is required to set up a social network, and there are no limits to the number of networks a user can join. Users of Ning social networks have access to functionality similar to that of more well-known social networks, such as Facebook and MySpace. Various features allow users to read news or learn about related events, join groups, read and comment on blog entries, view photos and videos, and other activities as set up by the network creator. RSS feeds let users subscribe to updates from specific parts of the social network.” (Educause, 2008)

#### **Steps to create SEMNET’s Ning site**

1. Create the name of the site – <http://semnet.ning.com>
2. Decide whether or not the site will be public or private - Public
3. Tagline, Description, Keywords, Language
4. Features
  - a. Photos – Upload and share photos

- b. Videos – Upload and share videos
  - c. Forum – Add a threaded discussion
  - d. Events – Allow people to organize and RSVP to events
  - e. Groups – Allow people to organize their own interest groups through your network
  - f. Blog - Feature posts from your blog or other people's blogs
  - g. Music – Allow people to upload and share audio
  - h. Notes – Allow admin to create, edit, and feature notes. Has more WYSIWYG than notes
  - i. Text – Put any text, widget, or HTML on main page
  - j. RSS – Add feeds from across the web
  - k. Badges – Promote your network across the web
  - l. Birthday – Display your members Birthday
  - m. Chat – Allow members to see who is online and chat
  - n. Description – Show your network description
  - o. Activity – Follow the latest member activity
  - p. Members – A list of your networks members
5. Appearance – pick a pre-made theme or customize the design with your own CSS design
6. Invite Friends – Can import friends from numerous email providers, upload csv files, or copy and paste email addresses

As the creator of the network I have access to other options, such as importing photos from Flickr, adding Ning features to Facebook pages, requesting access to source code to further customize a network, and including JavaScript that allows external tools to track network usage statistics. Members of the Ning social networks can find functionality similar to that of more well-known stand-alone networks, such as Facebook and MySpace. Various features allow users to read news or learn about related events, join groups, read and comment on blog entries, view photos and videos, and other activities as set up by the network creator. RSS feeds let users subscribe to updates from specific parts of the social network. (Educause, 2008) Ning also recently developed a chat feature that is similar to Facebook. When users are online, they can see who else is online and chat on the fly.

The overall appearance of the SEMNET site took much time to design. Content needed to be transferred from the static sharepoint site, to the Ning site. Many questions had to be answered. How do I transfer and organize the information to make the site easy for the users to find information? What information should be on the site? How do I organize the information from the JPA board and Advisory Council? What features would be worthwhile for SEMNET to utilize? What information would new and future members find beneficial? What information should be streamed to the site via RSS? Are there other web 2.0 applications that can be utilized and enhanced with Ning? Do I need custom tabs?

Ning has an impressive communication tool built into it. After the initial design was completed, I decided to test out the first by utilizing the invite friends application. I access address books from any number of web mail apps (gmail, yahoo, hotmail). I could copy and paste emails into a basic editor, invite my friends from other ning networks, or upload outlook

or text files. I first decided to test this with SEMNET's advisory council. However, I did not get the return membership I had hoped for! (20%)

The major challenge I am having is getting people to participate by giving (creating content) and taking (consuming content). (Rosenfeld & Morville, 2002, chap. 21) To engage the SEMNET members is going to take a bit more work. I plan on promoting the site at our face to face meetings and publishing content to the site rather than emailing information. Training is going to be key. The first meeting will happen on March 25<sup>th</sup> during the JPA Board meeting. I have also developed some hidden content (like video codec sites and information) that will require membership, to the site, in order to view. We are going to have some planning sessions in the future and the discussion forums may be a nice place to contain that information. Ning has the ability also feature discussions, pages, blogs, and members. And finally, I plan on getting some statewide telecommunication experts, to become featured members in order to engage the SEMNET audience into discussions.

SEMNET's primary groups are superintendents and technology coordinators and I feel it is very important that we extend the invitation to district principals, teachers, and curriculum coordinators. As we build the SEMNET ideagoras, it is important that we hear from all of our constituents to harvest external ideas and innovations to improve SEMNET's future. (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, chap. 4)

## References

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