

Social Media and the Porch

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By Adrian Dayton

I had my first taste of Southern hospitality this week while flying to Charleston, S.C. My wife and I were sitting next to a couple who struck up a conversation with us, and we became fast friends. By the end of the flight, they'd offered to give us a ride to our hotel and a short tour of the historic city.

There is an oddity that you will notice when driving in downtown Charleston: Most of the houses have porches, but instead of being on the front, they are on the side. This struck me as unusual. Porches were social places in the Old South. Family and guests could sit on the porch, and as neighbors and friends walked by, they could stop and chat.

It seemed sad to me that all the porches in Charleston were on the side of the houses, because people were missing out on so much of the spontaneous sociality that is offered by the front porch. With the porches spread along the side, it required a more deliberate effort to chat with people sitting on them.

Lawyers and law firms seem to be building side porches in the way they use social media. There is a big difference between having social media accounts and actually using social media. By simply signing up for LinkedIn and then never spending any time on the site, you are missing the whole point. It's like building a side porch for style, but never sitting out on it.

So how do we sit on the proverbial front porch online? This is easy: We spend a few minutes there each day. Jump on LinkedIn and share an interesting article you found that morning, answer a question one of your contacts has asked on Twitter, or perhaps read a new blog post written by one of your clients or contacts. There is no single way to use social media — just get on there and be yourself.

As for Charleston's side porches, it turns out they had good reasons for building them that way. Some believe incorrectly that it was to save on taxes, because frontage taxes are quite high. The real reasons included that land was at a premium and the lots weren't big enough to build big front porches. Probably even more important was that side porches were better positioned to capture the ocean breezes. On a hot, humid summer day, there was no better place to sit.

Be that as it may, social media are the new front porch. Give them a try — you never know who might walk by and strike up a conversation.

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