

At auto show, social media extend automakers' reach

January 20 2012, By Mark W. Smith

As Andreas Schmid traipsed through the exhibits at the Detroit auto show recently, he did so with dozens of unseen followers.

Schmid, armed with an iPhone 4S, posted photo after photo of the alluring sheet metal on display to the social network [Twitter](#).

"I had a lot of friends back home that wanted pictures, so I said: 'Just follow me on Twitter,' " said Schmid, 26, of Wooster, Ohio.

This year's North American International [Auto Show](#) is the most social it's ever been, expanding its Facebook reach and establishing one-on-one bonds with visitors via Twitter.

[Automakers](#) are creating social attractions at their exhibits, designed to extend the shelf life of the nine-day public display by encouraging visitors to share videos and pictures of their experience online.

Auto show organizers, meanwhile, have ramped up significantly, erecting a social nerve center on a raised platform above the showroom floor this year that is designed to stoke this sort of activity by thanking those who post messages and helping others get around.

This digital footprint, composed of thousands of user-snapped images shared online, has transformed the auto industry's marquee event to reach far beyond the thousands of visitors that will pass through Cobo Center this week.

With sweeping views of the nearby Jeep and Fiat exhibits, the auto show's social media hub is staffed during each hour of the public show, tracking the thousands of messages sent from the show floor.

Through the main auto show social media account - they're @NAIASDetroit on Twitter and have a Facebook fan page - a team of marketers is offering digital handshakes of sorts to auto show visitors.

The man behind the curtain is Buck Wise, CEO of Brighton, Mich.-based Severely Social - a five-person firm that landed the auto show account this year, the first year an outside firm has been used for just social media.

Since the show opened, Wise and his team have used the auto show's official social platforms to help visitors find a specific car in display, a parking spot on their way in or even locate a lost personal item.

"It's small things like that that we get geeky and excited over," Wise said.

The auto show has seen some big gains from the engagement, too, nearly doubling its Facebook fans in the last few months, Wise said.

At this year's show are five large video screens that display a curated list of tweets about the auto show. These are designed to open up that parallel discussion happening about the show on the Web so that all visitors can benefit from the tips posted there.

"Just because you're not on Twitter doesn't mean you can't take part in it," Wise said.

The surging photo-sharing application Instagram has also become more popular at this year's show, with hundreds of auto show images posted since the floor first opened to the media last week.

Ben Stone, 39 of New Baltimore, Mich., used the [iPhone](#) app to capture photos Sunday and then uploaded them from a nearby pizza place as he dined.

"I don't like to take myself out of the moment," Stone said. "I just snap what I snap and then I look at it later."

That sort of digital currency, well-lit images of new models snapped from smartphones, is an increasingly important part of the marketing mix for automakers.

"Typically it's two weeks and it's gone," said Scott Monty, Ford's global head of [social media](#). "In this case, the content lives on."

For the past several years, Ford employees have been tasked with tweeting from the show floor, sharing photos and answering questions.

New this year is the Ford Blue Oval card, which visitors can snag at the automaker's display. Visitors log in their name and email address and scan the card at the Ford display before taking part in the activities there. The user is then sent images and video from their time at the Ford display.

Chrysler, too, is offering professional photos taken of visitors in its cars, which can later be shared on Facebook or Twitter.

And at the Corvette exhibit, visitors can have an animated image taken of them leaping in front of the car, which can then be shared on social networks.

"It's really meant to let people bring the auto show experience beyond the walls of Cobo," Monty said. "To share it with other people who might have never been who are wondering what it might look like this

time."

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