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It started with an injured rescue dog, \$125 in cash and an old silk screen machine.

Inspired by the dog, David, Donny and Darren Hendrickson used the money and the machine to launch an online skateboard and apparel company that donates a chunk of its profit to animal causes. To raise awareness for their endeavor, the 25-year-old brothers — they're triplets — turned to Facebook.

Hendrick Boards managed within a year to accrue more than 28,000 "likes" on the social media website and has expanded to dozens of designs on T-shirts, skateboards and accessories. Facebook has enabled Hendrick Boards to find 150 shelters to donate to across the country based on its customers' ZIP Codes.

"It's the driving force behind our outreach," David Hendrickson said.

Using social networks to connect with customers is nothing new, but it's continuing to grow. It seems like nearly every business, from Wal-Mart to the mom-and-pop shop on the corner, has a social media presence of some sort.

Nine out of 10 small businesses surveyed recently by online business directory Manta.com said they were dedicating time to networking online. More than 11 million businesses maintain personalized pages on Facebook, according to the Menlo Park company, which introduced them five years ago. And new social media outlets keep appearing for businesses to figure out.

For those that aren't Facebook-Twitter-Pinterest savvy, the U.S. Small Business Administration and other small-business organizations are holding workshops to get them in the know. In addition, a cottage industry of consultants has sprung up to guide them.

Facebook has a digital classroom to help businesses develop eye-catching

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said she was surprised by the large turnout.

“It was standing-room only,” Flint said.

One reason small businesses’ interest in social media hasn’t subsided is because sites are constantly changing.

“When major shifts happen, some business owners panic with the changes,” Flint said. “But they have to remember that change affects everybody. It sort of levels the playing field.”

In Los Angeles, social media sites are fundamental for a business’ livelihood; food trucks announce their locations on Twitter to let customers know how to find them and new health spas can attract clients with a Groupon or Living Social deal.

Checking into a business through a social media site, such as Foursquare, Facebook, Twitter and Yelp, is the modern equivalent of talking about it with friends. But now the conversation includes feedback from the company itself.

“The business owners can react to what people are saying or talk to customers through their own page,” said Dina Mayzlin, an associate professor of marketing at USC’s Marshall School of Business. “Social media gives a restaurant a second chance to gain a customer who wrote that they were unimpressed or the chance to build a deeper relationship with their regular customers.”

Businesses have a lot more to think about on social media sites than just “likes” and “check-ins.” There are tricks of the trade, such as how to time posts, word Tweets and reveal attention-grabbing giveaways.

The practice of setting a schedule for photos and messages to be released to fans enables a business owner to set some time aside and focus on the other demands of

running an enterprise. The trick is to balance traditional face time with customers

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Facebook employees about best practices on the site after winning a contest from Facebook and American Express.

“We’ve grown up with Facebook and, yes, we are social media savvy,” David Hendrickson said. “But there’s so much more to learn.”

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