

An Aikido Dojo Guide to Using Online Social Networks

Dear Dojo-cho:

Aiki Extensions (www.aiki-extensions.org) is pleased to offer up this hopefully useful guide to social networks and how to use them to boost dojo attendance, community, and support.

We want to start by thanking our exemplar of social networking savvy, Lia Suzuki Sensei of Aikido Kenkyukai Santa Barbara, for her many insights that we've tried to capture here. Anyone near Santa Barbara should check out her website (<http://aksb.org/>) and consider attending her upcoming seminar November 6-8, 2009.

As a general rule, any college-age aikido student or recent graduate is much more likely to know this stuff and be able to execute many of these functions than someone experienced enough to be running a dojo - so consider yourself encouraged to avoid trying to do everything yourself, though you will want to be involved enough to make sure that your dojo's new or expanded web presence accurately reflects your dojo's authentic "personality"

What follows is in interview format - our questions in italics, Suzuki Sensei's answers in regular text. The interview was conducted in October of 2009:

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1] When did you first really engage with the idea that social media like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter deserved your attention as means to promote aikido in general and your dojo in particular?

I first put accounts up last April (Facebook) and May (Twitter and YouTube). With Facebook I jumped right in and ran with it. With Twitter, I was a bit unsure how to wield it, but started using it more regularly about a month later. I really started filling YouTube with content in June and July. None of these were immediately rewarding, but I treated each as an investment in time and momentum. Especially as a nonprofit dojo, it feels inherently better to market ourselves by raising awareness of aikido and our mission than in a way that feels slickly commercial. Social media in general is really good for raising awareness - by providing a window into someone else's world - but not as good for a strict commercial pitch - which people tune out instinctively because they come online onto community sites like Facebook seeking a more authentic human interaction and are almost universally annoyed by advertising.

2] Keeping in mind that some readers are not yet very savvy about such things, please describe what you have done to promote Aikido Kenkyukai Santa Barbara online?

I've focused on:

1. raising awareness, which means teaching the public what aikido is and how it's different from other arts.
2. what AKSB (our dojo) is and what we're doing.

Facebook is especially good for this. I don't think we've had lots of cross pollination (someone who goes to our facebook fan page because of a link on our website), but we have had lots of volunteer postings on Facebook that got their friends linked in. Once people become fans of our page, they

get the regular postings and that raises awareness on a daily basis. Some of those postings of course get shared with their friends, and then their friends, etc. and that can spread outward a long way.

I try to post O'Sensei quotes regularly, but I also post "dojo life" status updates for more a personal feeling and sense of community. I try to maintain a balance between my personal page and the dojo page - often the same information but with a different flavor. I also link videos that I think will be of interest and other articles and photos related to aikido and our mission, along with links to great aikido events or programs.

We also have an online fundraising presence via GiveZooks (www.givezooks.org), which is a social fundraising site for non-profits. Social media has helped bring traffic to our donation page. On Facebook I wrote a note and tagged all my friends. (the way you would tag a photo if they were in it) The note said:

Multiple Choice - \$10=___?___

1. a pint and an order of fries
2. a couple of lattes
3. making a difference in the life of a child
4. all of the above.

It took time to tag all the names, but the effort raised \$500.

We've also used VolunteerMatch.com and craigslist as sources of volunteers who don't train (volunteers who do train, of course, we recruit at the dojo). Many people out there value what aikido does without wanting to train and their willingness to help can be as beneficial as monetary donations or perhaps more.

Our 2008 was a rough year, we lost the dojo to a huge increase in rent the same week I was teaching in London, Glasgow, and Munich and training in Paris. Our dojo was homeless, the economy was down, and times felt pretty dark - I had limited resources, but people were approaching me online wanting to volunteer - so I decided to allow a new direction in dojo development and administration.

3] What has your greatest success story been so far?

The \$500 event discussed above was definitely a success. Also, about 3 weeks before July 4th, I tagged a photo with lots of the names on my friend list. The photos was the one on the front page of our web site and on the Facebook page and has kind of become our logo. It has me throwing an uke, but then I photoshopped a red circle around the "suggest to friends" button and announced a goal of 400 new fans by July 4th. A few of the friends I tagged unsubscribed, but we did get 400 new fans in about 2 weeks. Perhaps a few we lost could have been kept if they'd understood the benefit of becoming a fan, so I now run fan drives that also let people know about our work. For example, the last fan drive I ran said that "for every 20 new fans we get, we'll sponsor a low-income kid". Interestingly, this didn't get us as many fans, but people became more aware of the dojo mission. In the end, we got 40 new fans, which brought us to 2 low-income children that the dojo can now sponsor.

Note: To avoid feeling spammy - several posts a day are ok - but avoid tagging people in a photo they are not in, avoid posts that are ASKING for something. Inspirational posts, however, are all

good. Video interviews (she did one after teaching in Boston) have worked well. You can track how many comments, and how many "likes" your posts get, and provide a bit more of what the audience seems to like. Try to set an image at the beginning to attract the kind of fans that are the best fit for your dojo and community. "Steven Seagal" style aggressive dojos should have a different facebook page than a much more contemplative dojo might have.

editor's note: Steven Seagal is about to have a regular TV show on cable, so expect more prospective students coming by to ask if you teach what they see Segal sensei doing as a deputy sheriff on television - and figure out whether these students would be a good fit for your dojo and respond to them accordingly.

4] Which initiatives, if any did not generate the results you expected?

At the end of July (09), we started a drive "555 in 5" (555 fans in 5 weeks). We didn't even get close. I didn't tag people on the announcements the way I had before when we got 400 in two weeks, and perhaps it was too soon after the previous fan drive.

5] Did any of your online efforts generate good results that nevertheless surprised you?

Our website brought me a very pleasant surprise the day it went public: at the end of '08, I was trying to pick up the pieces - we didn't have a dojo, and I couldn't see very far down the path towards our recovery. I spent all day on Dec 26th getting domain name, and building the website. I had been putting off talking with my teacher - Takeda shihan - because all my news seemed so gloomy, but an HOUR after putting up our subscription form, I got my first email subscriber - and it was Takeda Shihan from Yokohama.

6] Your facebook page has lots of features. The tabs on the top of your page are Wall (a series of posted links or announcements), Info (contact details), Photos, YouTube box, Notes, and Boxes (which is itself a place for links, a discussion board, and more notes and video). Going down the side of your Facebook page shows fans, a newsletter signup, a fundraising campaign status "thermometer", and links to your YouTube channel and favorite pages. That's a LOT of content -

a] How much time does it take every day to keep it fresh?

Once it's set up - the facebook page only takes 10 minutes a day. I like to look at chat in the bottom right corner to see when most of my friends, or at least a threshold number of them, are on and put up the main posting for the day at that time. That's usually 10:30 am, but sometimes its 2:30 in the afternoon. If you're going to make several postings, try to spread them out over the day.

b] Which content seems to generate the most traction?

You have to know the audience that you've attracted to your page and keep them in mind when you post. Video seems to be more powerful. It also seems that people appreciate a glimpse into my life outside the dojo. I once posted a photo of my dog on the beach on my personal facebook profile which seems to have generated a lot of interest (as measured by comments). That window into my personal world seems to have been really appealing to people.

c] Assuming that a dojo just getting started on Facebook is not going to get everything together all at once - where do you recommend that they start?

I suggest they look into the difference between pages, groups, and personal profiles. For a dojo, starting a page seems the best bet. Then be active and create relationships. The first few weeks online I was worried about how it needed to look - but most people just look at their feed, not at the dojo page itself - so that's what you want to focus on. Then build up the rest around that. Get conversations going - comment back when someone leaves a comment. The level of engagement seems to be key to creating the sense of community we're striving for.

d] Is creating and maintaining this much content a job a dojo-cho can hand off to a group of web-savvy dojo volunteers or is this something one person really has to do by themselves?

I just taught a volunteer about how to run our YouTube channel. I don't need to give all my volunteers admin privileges for them to be able to help. I encourage them to check our page daily and comment when they have thoughts, and reveal the community behind the page. Some dojos will need more volunteers depending on the computer skills of the sensei. I want to get our volunteers to the point where they're ready to be admins and to speak for the dojo - but that does take some time and I don't want to rush it.

That dojo community really IS important, and it is important that dojo members be allowed to contribute. As an example - 3 weeks ago we held a kids belt ceremony to have parents come see them get their belts. Local coffee shops donated food for the after-party. One new adult student sent an email before the party about having to quit, and a mom who couldn't get her kid to want to come to class even though he loves it when he comes also left a message that they'd be dropping out. Both came to the party, and both came up to me after the party and said they didn't want to quit - they had talked to other dojo members at the party and reconsidered after having gotten tips and advice. The community is very self-supporting and sometimes the newer members more easily remember the fears and trepidation of beginners. So it is a good idea to have some other folks in the dojo available to the facebook community to do that online support as well.

7] On your YouTube page, the opening video (which automatically plays when you go to the page) has a thoughtful interview with you, with lots of footage of you teaching class and demonstrating technique. The video's production values are quite high, with some slow motion sequences, some picture-in-picture elements, etc. - so this was clearly a significant project. If a dojo does not yet have a good introductory video - what advice do you have regarding what they need to do to get a reasonable, YouTube-worthy clip?

Oh, that's a great story! It just presented itself out of nowhere. One day we were doing a public demonstration and a guy approached me just 15 minutes before the start. He had the most polite demeanor and gave a very deep bow, and asked permission to tape the demo. He didn't train aikido and told me he had never done any martial arts (I found out later that he had been the national kickboxing champion of the Czech Republic), but was quite impressed with what he saw in the mat, and was a documentary videographer. He asked if he might "follow" the comings and goings at the dojo and make a documentary. He got a ton of footage over about a 2 or 3 month period. One of my students Steve Trinkle of [AKI Pennsylvania](#) wrote up some interview questions. Then all I had to do was concentrate on my classes when he was getting footage, and try to relax during the interview. He shot and edited the video for free, so I feel very lucky.

But you have to remember that a video doesn't have to be professional to be compelling. Look at YouTube - some of the most watched clips are really low quality (think of most of those hilarious cat videos), but they are still compelling. I'll watch videos of my teacher Takeda sensei no matter how

poor the video might be, and I suspect we all have watched dozens of the old shihan video clips - and most of them certainly don't have high production values.

So you don't need to wait until you have a professional videographer available. Figure out what the strong points are of *your* dojo - the community aspect, the camaraderie, the intense work out... - and then make a video that shows those elements. Don't be intimidated by thinking that you have to meet some arbitrary technological standard.

If you have established a relationship with your online audience, you'll already know what content will suffice. Accept that there will, and should be, a lot of trial and error. My kids class member interviews get much less traffic than I thought they would, for instance, and my Aiki-Expo demo gets lots of traffic.

Another video that's turned out real well is one that emerged from an interview I gave during a seminar in Boston at [William Gleason Sensei's dojo](#). One of his students, Toby Bazarnick, edited the interview video and that got lots of traffic, and I got copies for use on my site which was great.

8] Once a dojo has at least one video worth posting - how do they get started creating a "channel" on YouTube?

You can create an account anytime and then its really easy. They walk you through all the steps, and you can read the FAQ ("Frequently Asked Questions" list) if you need to.

9] What benefits have you gained from using Twitter on behalf of AKSB?

Twitter does get more traffic to our website, though most traffic is from google searches and Facebook. Twitter accounts for about 1/2 or 1/3 of traffic compared to Facebook - as measured in clicks through to the website.

Another social media category is event planning sites. I want to evaluate [eventbrite.com](#) and [amiando.com](#) - which are "Facebooks" of the event world. They both let guests interact with each other ("Hey, I saw you were signed up for the seminar too, I look forward to seeing you there."), register, etc. It's another social media - another way to promote our next event, which will be a Seminar November 6 - 8 - at our dojo at the Santa Barbara Buddhist Temple. <http://aksb.org/2009/09/03/aksb-fall-gasshuku-with-lia-suzuki-sensei/>

10] What benefits have you gained from using LinkedIn?

I don't think LinkedIn has added much. I don't remember seeing it on the google analytics source of site visitors - but I created the profile to be complete. It is one more incoming link, and can't hurt.

11] How about RSS feeds?

We have that capability on the website, and a link on our Facebook page, but I am not sure I actually get notified about subscriptions, so I don't have a good way to measure that response.

Our website gets about 1,000 unique visitors a month, and RSS feeds wouldn't necessarily show up in that total. I recommend that people set up Google Analytics for their site, so they can track where their traffic is coming from.

12] Of all the things you've done to leverage social media - which three made the most difference?

- 1] Weekly newsletter
- 2] Facebook page for dojo
- 3] Personal Facebook page

13] When you compare what you're doing to what you've seen other dojos do online - where do you think you're doing really well, and where do you think there is still room to improve?

The owners of givezooks.com, which I recommend for online donations, have been giving me lots of compliments for innovative stuff I'm doing, and you (editor - that is to say, me) are calling and doing this interview, so I guess I seem to be ahead of the game, at least a bit. I've heard people say "Lia, you're everywhere" - so the content is getting out, which is encouraging.

What I think I've done well is spread the word fairly widely. If you google "aikido santa barbara", our dojo is not the first item, but we are 6 or 8 of the top 10 results, so I'm feeling good, especially considering we're dealing with a fairly new domain name. Those six or eight results are our Dojo page, our Volunteermatch.com page, our Facebook page, our Givezooks page, etc. So the BREADTH of our online presence directly affects google results as much as traffic to any one particular site.

I am also happy about generating content people seem to appreciate and managing not to shove any spam down people's throats.

Of course, social networking does not happen exclusively online. At local events, I've made sure to introduce myself to community leaders like the mayor, after having "friended" them online. Once that relationship is established, I am careful to only update them sparingly on what our dojo is up to. Educating the public starts at the top as well as the bottom.

I've found that when I'm introducing myself, it helps to save the word "aikido" for later in the conversation, because people generally respond better to talk about nonprofits and peaceful resolution of conflict, I guess because these are less intimidating, or at least better understood.

14] Many dojos are, like yours, nonprofits. Are there particular strategies you'd recommend to encourage donations as compared to recruiting new members?

I'm a fan of Givezooks.com. It costs \$99 a month but it has been paying for itself and then some. I've raised about \$3,000 so far (as of October '09). Supporters have made grassroots pages of their own, and those stories get out to lots of different contact lists. Thus, any of those has the potential to go viral. I've only gotten up to "B" in my contact list and am slowly sending out links to people. [Our page](#) has the progress thermometer everyone is expecting, and it gives donor the chance to feel part of something bigger as well as the chance to see the thermometer jump when they make their contribution. The site sends a tax-ID-included thank you receipt to all donors automatically, which helps a lot with bookkeeping and making sure donors feel attended to and appreciated.

(Editor: another donation-management site to consider is networkforgood.org and there are a bunch of useful ideas at fundraising123.org)

15] What role does your social networking presence online play in keeping your current membership well connected to each other and therefore more loyal to the dojo itself?

I have not done as much with this component. I have more kid students than adults training at our temporary dojo, and thus many of my students are too young for Facebook or posting photos. I do expect more of this in the future. Past members that have now moved to other parts of the country often connect by way of, and because of, the Facebook presence.

16] Any questions I should have asked if I understood this stuff better?

This seems fairly complete. Everyone's situation will be a little different, but this seems a good start.

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that concludes the interview. Our thanks to Suzuki Sensei for her efforts.

More links that may prove useful, particularly for nonprofit dojos:

1] http://philanthropy.com/live/2009/09/raising_money/

a recent (9/15/09) online conversation with staff from PayPal and Network for Good about online fundraising.

2] <http://philanthropy.com/live/2009/10/facebook/>

a recent (10/13/09) online conversation with Sarah Koch, nonprofit coordinator of Facebook Causes

3] <http://idealware.org/>

Candid reviews and information about nonprofit software

Aiki Extensions is an organization dedicated to disseminating and applying Aiki principles and methods outside the traditional martial arts training situation. AE members have applied Aiki principles in such areas as business, bodywork, psychotherapy, teaching, mediation, and sports. They have found that Aiki principles enhance their professional effectiveness and personal well being. More information about Aiki Extensions can be found at <http://www.aiki-extensions.org>