

Green Marketing Campaign

Solar San Antonio

San Antonio Business Journal - by [Nora Frost](#)

The goal: Garner awareness, support and educate the community (locally and globally) about solar energy.

The challenge: Meager marketing budget.

The solution: Social media.

Since its inception in 1999, Solar San Antonio has been a bit nontraditional in many ways, so it comes as no surprise that the organization never quite embraced traditional marketing, but instead has found much success with modern social media marketing.

“Solar San Antonio’s nature of being a nonprofit organization limited our budget for traditional marketing,” says Christine Chapa, Solar San Antonio’s communications and outreach director. “We primarily relied on face-to-face and word-of-mouth promotion to spread the message. With the addition of social media to our marketing tool set, we are now able to reach audiences beyond our previous range, including local, regional and national channels.”

Twitter (@solarsanantonio) and Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/SolarSanAntonio>) have been Solar San Antonio’s main channels of success. The nonprofit also keeps in touch with current and future supporters via MySpace, LinkedIn and YouTube.

Solar San Antonio’s progressive style stems from its visionary founder and Chairman Bill Sinkin, 97, who launched the organization when he was 86. Sinkin’s advocacy for solar energy manifested itself 30 years earlier when he installed San Antonio’s first major solar installation on the rooftop of his business, [Texas State Bank](#).

“I’m hoping that Solar San Antonio arouses enough interest, enough support and enough investors in source funding that it will be a focal point in this industry. We should be at the forefront and a leader,” Sinkin says.

Solar shepherds

As an advocacy and resource center for renewable and sustainable energy applications located in downtown San Antonio, Solar San Antonio is drawing attention to the city as a solar energy leader. In 2008, the [U.S. Department of Energy](#) named the Alamo City as one of its 25 Solar America Cities. Making industry headlines generated more connections for the organization, and the staff began connecting more customers, advocates, and the influential interested in the renewable energy. Social media tools were not only hip, but economically attractive.

“Social media is free. It saves our organization money,” says Chapa. “By using social media, our audience has grown exponentially. Social media involves engaging with our ‘customers.’ Social media enables us to connect with industry leaders on a regular basis.”

Though social media has no hard costs associated with it, Solar San Antonio dedicates manpower to the project. Chapa spends approximately two hours a day to posting, responding, linking and passing along information, namely through Twitter.

“Twitter has been especially useful when trying to get feedback from other cities on their solar policies and programs. In some cases, Twitter has been more helpful in gaining policy and program information than Internet research and phone calls combined,” says Chapa.

Though Chapa maintains most of the social media posts to the approximately 2,000 Facebook and Twitter followers, seven of the eight Solar San Antonio team handle and maintain their own Twitter accounts associated with the organization. The lone non-Twitter user is Sinkin, who prefers face-to-face, phone and even a bit of e-mail as forms of communication.

Encouraging connections

“Solar San Antonio and I have a very close virtual relationship. That is, we’ve never met and I’ve never even spoken to any of the advocates out there, though I have exchanged some rare e-mails,” says Tor Valenza aka Solar Fred, a [Solar Communications Consultant](#) at SolarFredMarketing.com and SolarPowerRocks.com. “We’ve built our relationship through sharing solar info through Twitter and connected blog posts, but let me just say that through (my communication with the organization through) Twitter, I ... feel like we would become instant friends if and when we ever meet. And I hope we do.”

Valenza is one of the solar leaders that Solar San Antonio has been able to build a relationship with via social media. They connect by sharing information and advocating for one another.



Catherine Dominguez / San Antonio Business Journal

Solar San Antonio's Christine Chapa and Bill Sinkin, chairman, use social media to tout renewable energy.

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That story is not uncommon, says Chapa, who builds credibility and a community by retweeting (or passing along) information among other solar industry leaders and advocates. Chapa markets Solar San Antonio's signature events — like Solar Fest and Stewardship Earth — as well as sharing headlines and factoids such as that rebates might reach 50 percent in 2011.

However, Chapa encourages the Solar San Antonio team not to spam with organization self-promotion.

“As the communications person, I use Twitter to network with local and national media/reporters, research successful Internet campaigns, connect with other marketers,” says Chapa. “As our policy/research staff member, Andrew Wood uses Twitter to see how solar programs are succeeding in other cities, which programs need work, and how San Antonio can adopt them to increase solar installations.”

Solar San Antonio's social media efforts have encouraged other industry giants like the **American Solar Energy Society** to take notice and start using Twitter as well.

“From a national perspective, Solar San Antonio is shining a really strong beacon,” says Richard Burns, program manager of the National Solar Tour.

Burns says he attributes Solar San Antonio's success to founder Sinkin being a man who is continually working on a legacy bigger than himself and creating an innovative team to build on that foundation. On the current team is his son Executive Director Lanny Sinkin, Renewable Energy Engineer Jeremy Osborne, Assistant to the Chairman and Marketing Assistant Danielle Arando, Public Relations Associate Veronica Guajardo, Events and Advertising Intern Rebecca Smith, Chapa and Wood.

Solar San Antonio is using social media not only to engage and bring awareness to solar energy but to also connect and inform curious, current and future consumers of the renewable energy. The organization has partnerships with the City of San Antonio, Bexar County, CPS Energy and receives funds from the **San Antonio Area Foundation**, corporate sponsorships, most recently from **Wells Fargo, N.A.**, plus individual and business memberships.

Not one to slow down, Sinkin says his next big project for Solar San Antonio is to raise a solid foundation of funds so that the organization can be a capital resource for businesses and individuals interested in installing solar energy, but unable to obtain traditional bank loans.

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