You hear about social media just about everywhere you go - there's no escaping it! And, believe it or not, it's not just for kids anymore. Golden Girl Betty White re-launched her career using Facebook, Jerry Mathers, aka "The Beaver," is tweeting about how to live a longer and healthier life (even with diabetes), and an elderly couple's "Webcam 101" video goes viral on YouTube, making them instant Internet sensations.

The numbers don't lie. According to *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, social media use among Internet users ages 50 and older has nearly doubled - from 22% to 42% over the past year. Half (47%) of Internet users ages 50-64 and 26% users age 65 and older now use social media.

That's all nice and dandy, but what exactly *is* social media?

Social media consists of online tools and websites that encourage people to interact with companies, brands, and people (including celebrities and journalists) and form communities by creating, publishing, and sharing content. Social media is a two-way communication stream, whereas with traditional media, messaging is published through a one-way communication stream to the masses, e.g. radio, television and newspaper.

Social media is fast changing and take on many different forms, including social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace), blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g. YouTube, Flickr), virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), social gaming, podcasts, and wikis, to name a few.

To give you a general idea of the social media landscape, here are some basic terms to help you get started.

Blog: an online journal that is usually (but not always) written by one person about a particular

topic. It is updated on a regular basis with entries that appear in reverse chronological order. Blogs typically contain comments by other readers and links to other sites. ***Twitter*** is a popular form of "microblogging," which is a short form of a blog, limiting each message to 140 characters.

Podcast: a form of audio broadcasting that is available as a digital file (usually audio but sometimes video) that can be downloaded to a computer or portable device, such as an MP3 player or iPod. Podcasts usually contain talk back radio style content.

Social Networking Site: an online community that allows you to create a profile, add friends, share ideas and events, and communicate with other members. The most popular social networking site (and the most-visited website in the world), ***Facebook***, allows you to reconnect and stay in touch with friends, family, classmates and colleagues. ***Eons*** is a social network designed for aging baby boomers and seniors.

Social Gaming: online games that are played with other people and include interactive elements or content that can be shared online. Social games are played on social networking sites, game portals and websites. Players create profiles, chat, and share information with other players. ***Winster*** is a social gaming site that appeals mostly to older adults. The games are designed to encourage a positive social interaction and provide a sense of community with like-minded individuals who enjoy playing collaborative games, not competitive ones.

Virtual World: an online computer-simulated space that includes aspects of real life with fantasy elements. Typically, you can create a representation of yourself (an avatar) and socialize with other "residents" of this online world. A popular virtual world is ***Second Life***, which is being used by non-profits and businesses to run discussions, virtual events and fundraising.

Video/Photo Sharing sites: a website that hosts user-generated videos or photos that is shared on the Web. ***YouTube*** is the most popular video-sharing site on the Web, and also the second most visited website in the world.

Wiki: a website developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content. The most popular wiki is ***Wikipedia*** , a publicly-written, collaborative encyclopedia available online.

This may all seem a little overwhelming at first, but don't be discouraged. The best way to dip your toes into social media is by joining a community that best suits you or sounds the most interesting to you.

by Kim Hong
Assistant Director Public Relations

Since Internet users over the age of 50 are driving the growth of social media, companies and web designers are developing better computer technologies and websites that accommodate the specific needs of older Internet users.

Social media is not just a way to connect with grandkids, look at photos, and reconnect with old friends, but it's also a way to exercise the mind, lift spirits and boost morale.

"Don't get overwhelmed. It's daunting, but not impossible - just ask for help if you need it. Just like you helped your kids ride a bike, they can help you learn how to communicate with the world," advises Jerry Mathers, best known as the loveable Theodore "Beaver" Cleaver in the television sitcom series, *Leave It to Beaver.*

If your kids aren't around to help, there are plenty of organizations, like ***SeniorNet*** **,** and communities dedicated to providing older adults with computer education and social media classes. It's just a hop, skip and click away!

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