



Village People

RVillage founder Curtis Coleman is disrupting social media and redefining perspectives on how to effectively market to RV consumers. His niche social networking site has grown to more than 300,000 users.

By Mark Quasius and RV News Staff

Photos By: Stuart Photography Co.

Being social can mean different things to different people. Facebook revolutionized socializing with friends and family, but traveling the country in an RV often puts consumers far from those they know.

Living life for 30-plus years as a touring musician, Curtis Coleman was all too familiar with being far from friends and family. Each gig, each town, each day dropped him in unfamiliar places surrounded by unfamiliar people.

Coleman bought his first RV in 1992 and began RVing full time in 2009. He used forums, Facebook and other methods to connect with people and share his passion for the RV lifestyle, but he wanted something more.

At 2 a.m. in a Santa Fe, New Mexico, RV park, an epiphany hit him. He wondered, "Who are all these people around me, and how do I connect with them in a meaningful way? Is there a social media site that can help me get to



"Who are all these people around me, and how do I connect with them in a meaningful way," Curtis Coleman pondered before creating and launching the RVillage platform in 2014. (Inset) Among the features of the RVillage platform is the ability for users to plot the route they are taking and see other RVillage users they will encounter along the way.

know the people around me as I travel and enjoy the RV lifestyle? How can I better network when I am constantly on the move?"

Although forums and camping clubs existed, they did not meet his need to form relationships at current locations or where he might travel next.

Coleman and his team created RVillage to build an ever-evolving network of people passionate about the RV lifestyle. The site enables consumers to talk to fellow RVers to become friends, plus communicate with others they already might know who share their interests in RVing. According to Coleman, they built the platform to tap into people who "have been there, done that or who may want to do that soon."

"They generally don't know anyone at first when they first join but want

to meet other RV owners near them with common interests," Coleman said. "Members want to learn tips from other members on good places to camp, good RV repair shops and new products. It's not uncommon for members to get together, go out to eat together and build lasting friendships through RVillage."

The Response

After the site's beta launch in 2014, the RVing community responded in a big way. Today, RVillage has more than 300,000 active users, and a new subscriber signs up every 90 seconds. Currently, 600 to 800 new subscribers register each day—nearly 25,000 people per month. Six months ago, only 11,000 new people joined per month.

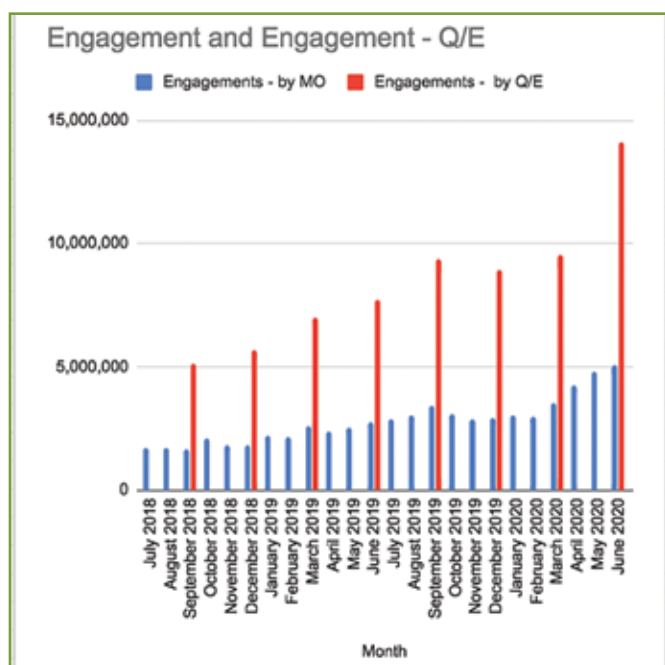
RVillage is free to join. Coleman said the platform's true value is the

social interactions that happen all day, every day. The site facilitates hundreds of thousands of daily interactions between users.

The website offers topical rooms and groups that consumers opt into to connect with others who have similar interests. Consumers add friends they wish to stay in contact with and can reach out to others who might be located at the next stop on a journey. The social media community can chime in on subjects of interest and post advice on topics members are knowledgeable about. With more than 3,000 groups on the site, Coleman said a group exists for nearly every hobby or interest conceivable. Examples include Coffee and Espresso Enthusiasts; Free Camping, Boondocking, and Camping on Public



A chart showing new user growth skyrocketing at RVillage since the beginning of May, peaking at more than 1,000 users a day added in early July.



As user growth has continued to climb at RVillage, so has engagement. This chart shows the growth in notifications sent, with 5 million notifications sent in June.

Lands; Grand Design RV Community; KOA Fans; and the Freightliner Chassis Owners Club.

One of the site's most popular features is how it displays and identifies other RVers located near the user. Consumers even can enter a place they are traveling to and the route they will take, and the site identifies other RVillage users along their path.

Regarding the site's content, Coleman clarified the difference between forums that have subject-driven content and a social networking site such as RVillage, which instead uses "feed technology." Feed technology ties a user's posts to a person, and then disseminates those posts to that user's friends list. When a user's friend comments on the original post, the post also then is pushed out to the new commenter's friend list. The ability for a post to go viral is increased greatly through active conversation and users' comments. In comparison, posts on forums live in a subject

thread, and only people who visit the thread or indicate they want notifications on a specific thread see the posts.

The Business End

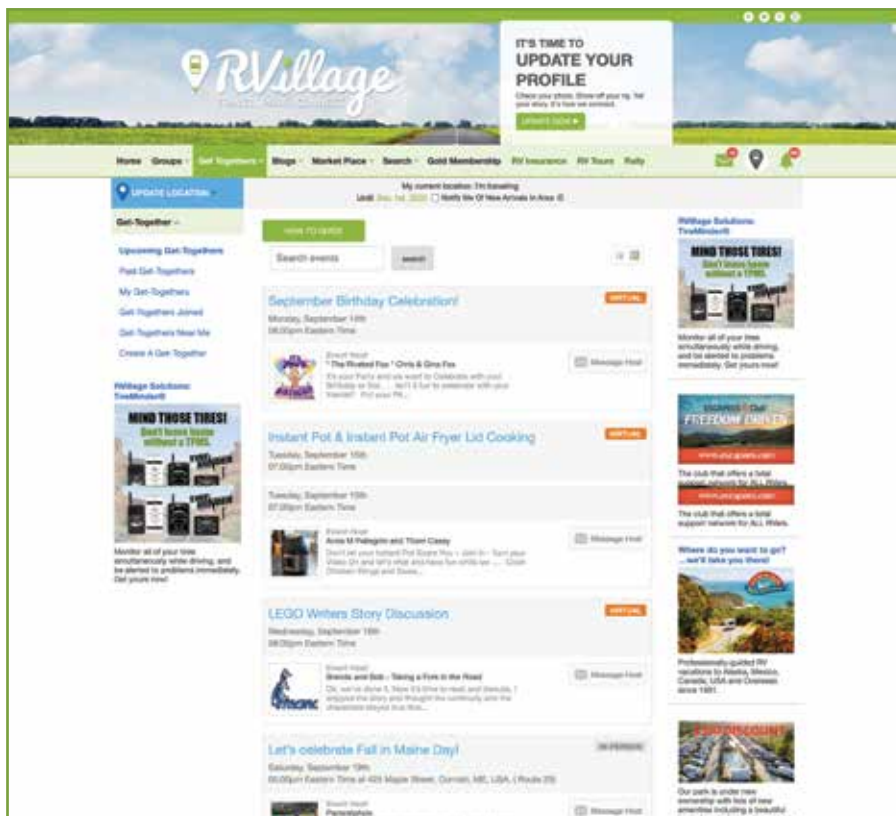
In a recent RVIA webinar for RV aftermarket companies called "Connecting with Today's Consumer," Coleman said, "If you want to be relevant in social media spaces, you need to understand consumers are not on social media to learn about products. Learning about products is usually the third or fourth reason they may be on social media. People join because they have a passion for RVing and they 'self-identify' what their interests are."

He said companies cannot be relevant to consumers in today's business environment unless they participate in social media.

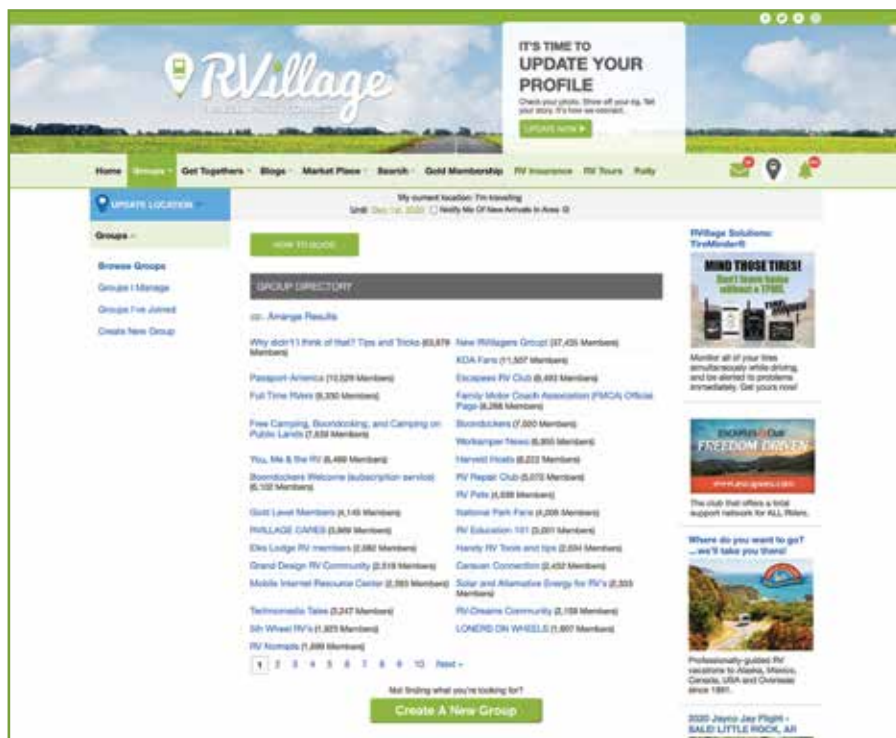
"If people are not talking about your product on social media, you are not relevant," Coleman said. "One of the ways companies try to be relevant is going on Facebook and dropping information about their company and products wherever they can. Bad idea! Horrible idea. You will become less relevant by doing that. The moment you do that, the audience will block you, and you will never be invited back again. People on social networking sites can sniff gorilla marketing from a mile away. They will ban you immediately because you weren't invited to be there in the first place."

He said companies that have their own social media page on Facebook misunderstand the long-term results of having lots of members. He emphasized that people often join a branded company page only to later regret doing so. As the companies they join slowly take over their personal feed with product information, users in short order disable the company's notifications. From that point on, those company-generated notifications forever will go unseen by nearly every member who initially might have joined the page. He estimates less than 10 percent of members of company social networking pages ever see the posts after the vast majority opt out of notifications.

Coleman said companies have made a big push to enlist professional social influencers to promote their products. RVillage has seen a huge influx of social influencers using



Among the features of the platform is the ability to create get-togethers with other users.



More than 3,000 groups currently are available on the site for users to join, featuring nearly every hobby or interest conceivable.

RVillage to spread the word about YouTube content they have created.

He concedes while this is a step in the right direction, the secret to true success is to have ordinary people who own and use your product talk about it on social media. Encouraging known customers to join niche social media and share their experiences and satisfaction with a product reaps huge rewards.

He cites RVillage's success, and subsequently all businesses' future success, to aggregate, user-created content rather than company-generated marketing. He compares the content to how other large businesses have achieved success.

"The biggest news content creator on the planet is not The Wall Street Journal or (The) New York Times," Coleman said. "It's Facebook because they are aggregating content from others rather than creating it themselves. Airbnb has more hotel rooms available than Marriot, Hilton and Choice combined, yet they don't own a single room nor employ a single housekeeper. Uber and Lyft are similar in that they don't own cars but are the largest taxi companies."

Coleman said the Tampa RV show is a perfect example of how user-created content drives sales. The show encouraged consumers to post on social media sites pictures of themselves, the event and the fun they experienced. All those personal testimonies legitimized the show's relevancy in ways advertising and gorilla marketing could not. Consumer attendees essentially became unpaid salespeople and ambassadors. He said they achieved more to create excitement about the event and drive traffic than advertising ever could.



Attendees at the 2020 RVillage rally in Live Oak, Florida were treated to an A-list of educational seminars on the RV lifestyle. Presenters included Chris Dunphy and Cherie Ve Ard from Technomadia who spoke on mobile internet solutions; The RV Geeks who spoke about solar installation; and Mike Sokol who spoke about RV electricity.

Companies also can benefit by running promotions that put products in the hands of RVers. He said giving products to 50 RVers potentially could reap great product feedback and reach 100,000 people. RVillage soon will roll out a program for consumer product testers, which is just one way RVillage can help RV suppliers grow business. Companies also can garner important feedback on prospective products or services from the large community of potential users/buyers.

The RVillage platform offers several ways to reach consumers so they can do business with a company. Coleman said one of the most effective ways a company can tap into its consumer audience is by hiring RVillage's consulting team to create custom strategies and targeted marketing packages

that are digitally relevant to social networking users. He said that although companies can use these consulting practices on RVillage, the procedures also will greatly improve relevance on other social networking sites. RVillage also offers advertising on the platform's many group pages and other areas of the site.

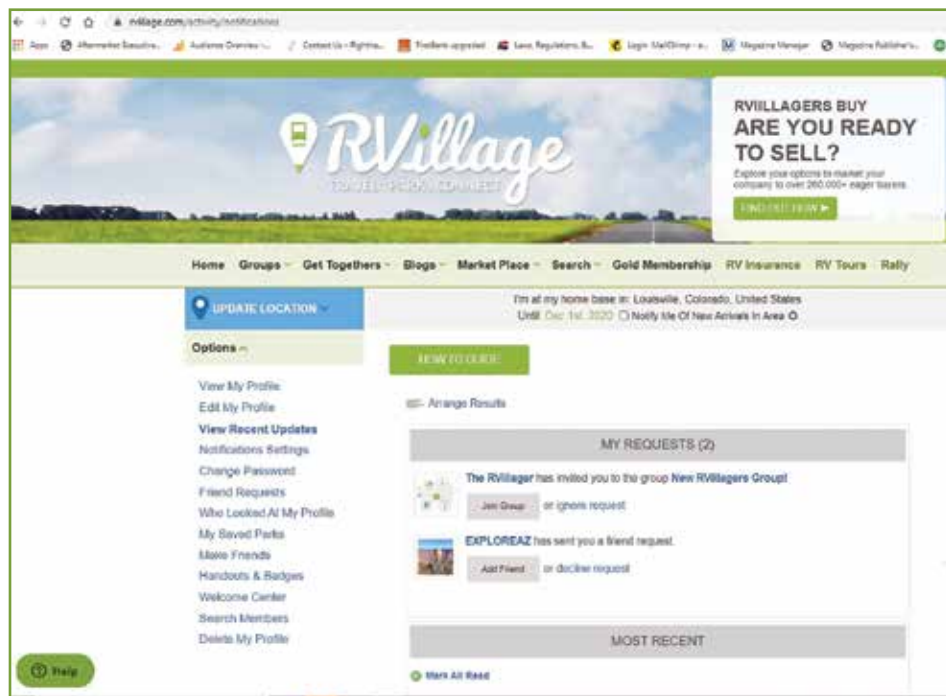
"While revenue is important to RVillage, businesses being successful in their advertising and digital relevancy campaigns is equally important to us," Coleman said. "The two go hand in hand. Our revenue is driven by business advertising, but we are committed to presenting advertising in a way that doesn't compromise the user experience. It is a phenomenal win for both sides when marketing is done correctly."

Consumer Demographics

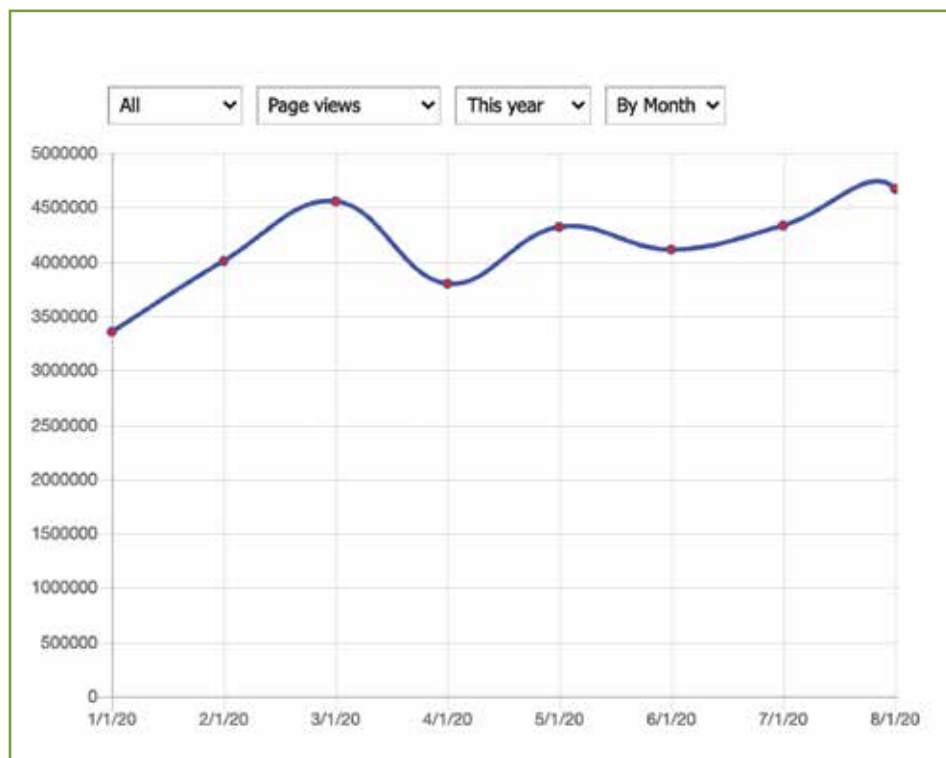
As consumers join and use RVillage, a variety of data points are collected to enhance targeted marketing and the user experience. The company captures information such as home address, age, marital status, past military service, employment status (working/retired), RV use patterns (seasonal, part time or full time), RV model owned and a user's interests and likes/dislikes.

Despite these data points, Coleman said one of the most crucial data points is the real-time location data of users using the site.

"Location data can be a highly valuable tool to companies with fixed locations like dealerships, parks, repair facilities," Coleman said. "Knowing what people are talking



RVillage users can get notifications through the platform when there is activity within a group they joined, or when other users have requested to become friends.



More evidence of the continued use of the RVillage platform can be found in its pageviews per month, which have been at or above 4 million in six of the first eight months this year.

about, trends in real time with consumer pain points all tied to location is immensely valuable.

“Data is everything. For example, while showing an RV dealership ad to everybody may have an effect, being able to show that same ad to people most likely to buy from that dealership because of their location, demographic and the rig they are talking about on social networking is a powerful tool that cannot be ignored,” he said. “The consumer benefits as well. They are seeing ads that are relevant to what they are searching for and talking about. We put a ton of effort and invested millions of dollars into gathering data on users so we can give them exactly what they like best and are most interested in.”

Despite the comprehensive consumer data points collected, RVillage does not sell its information.

Coleman stressed that “social networks are a delicate fabric,” and companies need to learn to effectively weave the right kind of messaging that connects on a personal level to be successful.

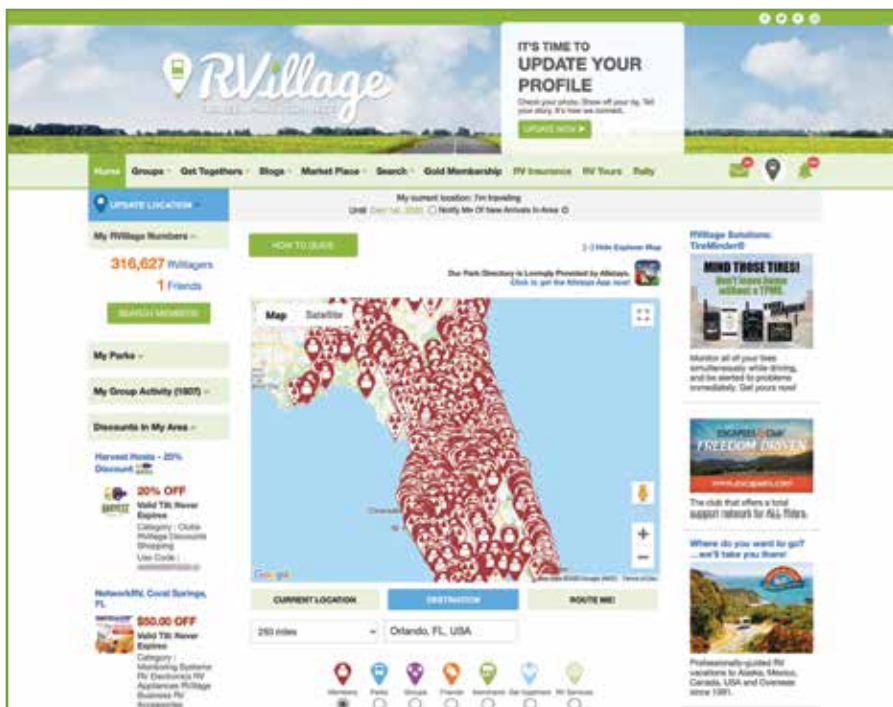
To assist RV companies to do just that, RVillage hired RV industry veteran Mark Lucas as business development manager in March. Lucas will serve as a concierge for RV businesses wanting to improve their digital relevance and comprehensive reach using social networking.

“He and his team have already done such great work for the people who have contacted him,” Coleman said. “He has been one of the most valuable assets we’ve gained because of his industry knowledge paired with his passion for what we do. He works with a really talented team led by our national sales manager, Christina Veselik. Together, they effectively assist businesses to tell their story in a way that produces quantifiable results.”

Coleman said RV manufacturers, suppliers, dealerships, service centers and RV parks all have different marketing goals. RVillage’s customized



Longtime RV industry veteran Mark Lucas is the business development manager for RVillage, leading a team which helps companies speak to consumers through the social networking platform.



The homepage for RVillage users will contain a map of nearby users along with information such as the user's favorite parks, groups and discounts available nearby.

consulting services help leverage messaging to specific data points in ways that are extremely targeted while also being cognizant of why consumers use social networking.

"Look, I know companies are eager to use these tools," Coleman said. "Consumers want to connect with companies' products and services, but they want to do that in ways that speak to their needs. Where Mark, Christina and the RVillage team really shine is they make it so companies can speak to consumers how they want to be spoken to, when they want to be spoken to about the things they are interested in."

RVN