

Cody Heitschmidt

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

How does a person generate a large turnout at a community meeting? Door prizes? Free food? Maybe a suggestion of a proposed toxic waste dump in your backyard? Today we'll learn about an initiative which successfully utilized social media to stimulate a large turnout to help with a community project, thanks to a technology communications consultant in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Cody Heitschmidt is a digital communications consultant who helps clients with 21st century communications. He is a native of Hutchinson, Kansas. After a stint at Hutchinson Community College, Cody joined the Marines, was stationed in California, and was deployed all over Asia. Cody married his high school sweetheart Tamara and she moved to California as well.

When their daughter was born, Cody and Tamara moved back to Kansas. They settled near Hutchinson at the rural community of Nickerson, population 1,187 people. Now, that's rural.

"It was the greatest move I ever made," Cody said. "I'm big on family. We came back to where all my new daughter's family were located." Having grandparents around proved to be a blessing in many ways. "Now I have a 15 year old girl and a 12 year old boy, and I've never paid a babysitter," Cody said.

Cody started a hunting and outfitting service while Tamara was learning web design. When Cody and Tamara applied their ideas about web design to his outfitting business, the response was remarkable. Their pioneering work on search engine optimization brought calls from all over. But after their son was born, Cody decided to sell the outfitting service and concentrate on his wife's website business. She had founded an information technology company known as LogicMaze.

"Her business had grown to the point that it needed about one-and-a-half employees," Cody said. "She was the one and I was the half." They built the business to seven employees and sold it in 2008.

Others were interested in Cody's experience in information technology, so he became a digital communications consultant. "I do all the way from big corporations to very, very small businesses," Cody said. He assists with what is referred to as 21st century marketing. In practice, this means helping individuals, schools, and businesses understand how to use Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, and more. With his help, Cody has seen clients build their business ten-fold with the assistance of such social media.

In 2009, he was brought in to help the Educational Services and Staff Development Association of Central Kansas. When the staff recognized that schools themselves could benefit from Cody's expertise, they started offering sessions about 21st century marketing to the schools. A school superintendent from Erie was one of the participants. He decided to hire Cody to come work directly with his school.

When Cody went to Erie to talk about 21st century marketing, among the listeners were the school's project-based learning teachers and the local economic development staff. They were eager to pick up on these ideas. Meanwhile, the city parks department had received a small grant for park renovation but was having a hard time finding people

to work on it. Cody suggested creating a Facebook group of people to be notified of the project.

City staff scheduled a work day at the park and posted on Facebook that volunteers were invited to come help. To the surprise of the community, more than 90 people showed up with tools and heavy equipment. That would represent more than ten percent of the working population of the community, which demonstrates the power of social media and 21st century marketing. Meanwhile, the project-based learning teachers found ways that kids could learn from working on this initiative.

“I had been preaching and contending that it would work,” Cody said. “They put it to use and rekindled that volunteer spirit, like the way America used to be. It was exciting. Now they’re constantly contacting me to see what they can do next.” For more information, see www.codytalks.com.

How does one stimulate a big turnout at a community meeting? Social media can help. Cody Heitschmidt is making a difference by helping people benefit their communities by using these tools of technology.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.