

# Social Street - A Hybrid Approach to Neighborhood Engagement

**Author :** Brian Bowman

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As we look to build community and solve problems together, we learn quickly that communication can be an asset or a challenge. Good communication can lead to dialog and understanding, while poor communication (or none at all) can be neutral or even damaging to relationships.

For communication nerds, the term “noise” is used to describe anything that interferes with proper reception of a message. Think about how you watch video. Noise can be an interruption in your Wifi, a weather event that disrupts the signal or even a talkative person who prevents you from hearing what’s said.

Avoiding the noise can be a challenge. It’s everywhere. We’re busy - many of us would admit to being distracted from time to time - and lots of things demand our time and attention. For example, in this era, many of us spend time and attention on social media. Facebook reports that it’s quickly approaching 1.5 billion [daily users](#), for example. That’s nearly half the 3.4 billion people with internet access globally, according to the [International Telecommunications Union](#). According to Pew Research, almost [two-thirds](#) of American adults use Facebook, including nearly three in four American women. The platform transcends age, gender, and other demographics.

It’s easy to throw hands in the air and declare that community engagement is difficult or even impossible

because everyone's looking at their screens. If a majority of Americans are using Facebook or other social media platforms, we have little hope of attracting their attention. But maybe our approach doesn't have to be either-or. What if social media could be used to build or even enhance local, face-to-face relationships?

A relatively new concept called "[Social Street](#)" combines social media platforms with face-to-face meetings. Social Street requires two things: a closed social media space (Facebook groups are a favorite for some) that leads to in-person meetings for the purpose of addressing specific issues. Typically, the relationships created in this environment are nurtured through meetings that continue both online and in-person.

A [study](#) by Mosconi et al. followed a community in Italy for two years to see how the hybrid approach worked there. Here's what they learned: a handful of organizers created a closed Facebook group called "Residents in San Pio X and surroundings." Then, they created a simple flyer explaining the group's purpose of developing new ideas, events and regenerating social culture. Around 300 flyers were distributed locally.

Supporters appeared quickly; within a month, the group included around 72 participants. Those new members introduced themselves to the group and interacted exclusively online at first. Within a couple of weeks, the organizers proposed in-person social events. Some were social, others tackled a specific need. Results of the in-person meetings were reported back to the online group.

The combination of the Facebook group and in-person social gatherings is credited with several initiatives in the area, a community garden, a "little library" and a Christmas party. It has also led to new friendships and help for those who need it. As one member of the community told the [New York Times](#), "The best part of this is that it breaks all the schemes. We live near one another, and we help each other. That's it."

The Italian group is still active, with more than 400 active members online. There are currently hundreds of Social Street initiatives in Italy now, with new groups appearing in the United States, Chile, Brazil and other places.

If you're looking to make improvements to your neighborhood or simply encourage neighbors to meet, this model may be worth considering. Facebook can provide the group's online home while an application like [Nextdoor](#) is used to spread the word. To follow the Social Street model, you simply need to create an online presence with a plan to gather members in person. Treat the two as halves of a single group, always reporting back to the online group what happened in the face-to-face meetings.

It's easy to be frustrated by the impact of social media groups; however, with a little innovation and a friendly mission, social media can lead to real-life connections.