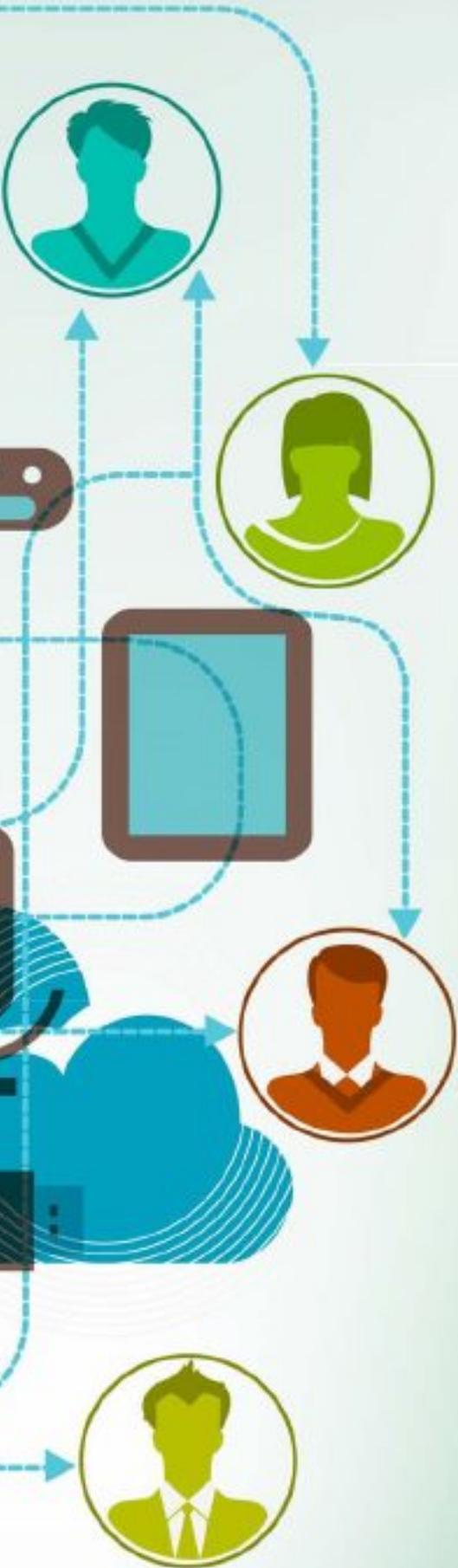


GET CONNECTED



Laura Fountain
reports on the
benefits of online
networking



Running can be a solitary sport. Without a team around you the victories and failure of competition and training are yours and yours alone. And if your friends and family don't run, there's only so much they can empathise with your setbacks in training or pretend to be interested when you tell them about all the functions on your new GPS watch.

MEDIA INTERACTION

But there's a place you can go where people understand why the difference between a 4:01 marathon and a 3:59 marathon is so much greater than just two minutes, people who 'get' the fact that you need to eat exactly the same meal at exactly the same time before every race and who know how frustrating being told by a physio not to run for a week can be. That place is online.

Social media is part of everyday life for many of us, but runners are finding it an important tool for connecting with others to share experiences, offer tips and get encouragement. Jose Reyes (@mramblingfool) met his virtual training buddy Blanda Camacho (@Champalada) on Twitter more than a year ago and, although they've never met, they offer each other support and encouragement for training.

GIVE AND TAKE

"I live in Somerset, but my virtual running partner is in Guam (in the Western Pacific)", says Jose. "For the past few months we've been supporting each other through training for half marathons we each have scheduled for this autumn."

"The partnership is different because it isn't a physical motivation of keeping up with a real person while on a run. But as we both go through our training and report back on our runs, the motivation is still there to get out, train, and clock up a good time and distance. We talk through our runs, compare data and pace, training techniques and even running tech. We both run at a different pace, so being a virtual partner is almost better as we can still each run at our own pace. I think it has definitely helped my training.

His training partner, Blanda, agrees: "I get a tonne of information, encouragement, and sense of community from Twitter. In my real life, I have few running friends, and of

them, very few that I can talk running with the way I can with the folks on Twitter.

"I enjoy looking at and discussing the little details of running: pace, strides, form, running conditions, etc and Jose gets that and doesn't think I'm weird for it. I can brag and not be polite with him, which I can't do with real life partners. I haven't found one I can be that way with. All that and we don't have to actually 'talk'. I just message him and tell him about my lovely blood blisters as I go about my day. It's perfect because I don't have extra time or energy for long winded conversations."

GOING LOGO

Running brands are keen to engage with runners through social media and can provide a valuable source of training information and advice. Sophia Marks, Marketing Coordinator at Brooks, explains. "We try to engage with our followers in a way that they feel totally immersed into the brand, it is important to us that we know that our followers feel part of Brooks and that they are valued."

"We try to base our communication on creating and debating - we want to

Social media is part of everyday life for many of us, but runners are finding it an important tool for connecting with others

hear from our followers and aim to get more people into running. For example on Twitter we have created #askgraeme; where we dedicate one day a week for our followers to send in their running related questions and @fitFAQ (Graeme Hilditch, a leading Personal Trainer) will answer them."

EXPRESS YOURSELF

If the 140 character limit of Twitter is too short to express your love of running, blogs offer a limitless outlet for runners to express themselves. Whatever your pace or mileage, there's people just like you writing and reading blogs about running. Jennifer Jahn blogs at www.2itchyfeet.com and finds that putting her goals out there

for everyone to see helps keep her accountable. She says: "In the beginning, I was blogging to keep track of my training, to keep myself accountable and to keep family and friends up-to-date with what I was up to. At least for those who cared to read along. Running was still a really new thing in my life back then, having gone from self-proclaimed hater to training for my first half in little over a year."

"I don't know what it is about making a 'statement of intentions' to the wider world, or, rather, the cyber world. But actually formulating a goal out loud makes it concrete. It makes it real. Like my goal of running a sub-2-hour half marathon. It's putting it out there and

I started running about five years ago and didn't think I could do it, so I started a blog to record my experiences

then suddenly you don't really want to disappoint. So it gives you that bit of extra drive and motivation. It's also tremendously helpful to hear from readers doing similar things and how they're getting on or coping with similar problems."

With so many different social media platforms, it can be difficult to keep up or know where to start. Blogger at theredrocket.co.uk and PR consultant at Firefly Communications, Phil Szomszor, has some expert advice: "The main thing is to use the platforms that you're most comfortable with. Personally, for running, I mainly use blogs and Facebook. Don't feel that you've got to be on every platform there is. Start gradually and experiment. Also, don't feel you have to use networks that your (real life) friends use - I've met loads of cool people that have got into running through social media.

CHARTING PROGRESS

"I started running about five years ago and didn't think I could do it, so I started a blog to record my experiences as I built up to running my first half marathon. I found that lots of other people were doing the same thing and were really supportive of each other. It's great as a diary to look back at races I've done."



TOP RUNNING TWEETERS

New to twitter? Here's a few inspiring tweeters to get you started.

Paula Radcliffe	@paulajradcliffe
Mo Farah	@Mo_Farah
Haile Gebrselassie	@HaileGebr
Richard Whitehead	@Marathonchamp
Jonnie Peacock	@JonniePeacock
Jo Pavey	@jopavey
Scott Jurek	@ScottJurek
Usain Bolt	@usainbolt
Scott Overall	@scottoverall
Claire Hallissey	@HallisseyC

The most widely known social network, and the one that you're most likely to already be in is Facebook. But instead of just using it to stay in touch with your friends and family (as well as those people you haven't seen for years and keep meaning to 'unfriend') you could be using it to connect with other runners.

Lisa Beaney found the BOSH running group via the Brighton Marathon Facebook page after signing up for the race. The BOSH group, which now has more than 300 members, is a space on Facebook where people of all abilities go to discuss their training.

ATTUNED SUPPORTERS

"I know a few other people that run and I'm a member of the local athletics club but BOSH is different," says Lisa. "I'm still one of the slowest at the running club, with BOSH there are lots of people faster than me and slower than me. The main thing I get from BOSH is having a group of people I can chat to about running. My husband isn't a runner and most of the time isn't that interested in pace, diet, races etc but

the people in BOSH provide a lot of support to each other.

There's always someone to answer any questions you may have. You can have a moan about a bad run as well as share the really wonderful moments with people that know exactly what it is like."

Members of the group were all training for Brighton marathon and on race day they met up before the start. "I was really nervous before the marathon. I was running it on my own, and having a group of people to meet up with beforehand and chat to was brilliant. I met two other women who were planning on running about the same pace as me so we stuck together and kept each other company.

"Since then I have met other BOSH runners at various races. It's always great to have someone to chat to beforehand and have a supporters club to cheer you on, even if you have never met the person before you still cheer for them."

■ [Laura Fountain](http://laurafountain.com) blogs about her own running at lazygirlrunning.com and tweets from @lazygirlrunning