

Social Networking: The New Frontier in Making Business Connections

By Polly Moter, owner, ProMoter Marketing Communications

Whether you are ready or not, social networking has quickly emerged as the new frontier in making business connections. You've most likely heard many of the social networking buzz words being tossed around among teenagers but might be left wondering what real-world applications they have to offer you as a business professional. In today's tech-age, the answer to that is quite a lot!

"Through social networking sites I have facilitated introductions and cultivated relationships through mutual friends. Those new relationships generated business opportunities for me and for my contacts," said Michael Gabhart, sales consultant for U.S. Voice & Data. "Social networking enables more consistent interaction and complements existing relationships. I've often found a much stronger connection with a business associate that I was not aware of. That knowledge takes the relationship and trust to a whole other level."

Michael uses a variety of social networking sites to enhance his business connections including LinkedIn, Plaxo, Georgetown College Alumni Site and Phi Kappa Tau Fraternity's The Link.

Nevertheless, the value of these online connections depends on the user's interest and resolve in maintaining these relationships.

"It takes a lot of work to stay connected to a lot of people," said Michael. "Social networking sites are vehicles to stay connected to a larger number of people than you would normally be able to manage. As a sales consultant for a technology firm, relationships are critical to my business. The more relationships I can manage, and the stronger the relationship I can establish, has a direct correlation to the number of leads I can generate and ultimately the number of sales I can close."

Social networking sites offer the user a variety of beneficial applications including the ability to connect

with prospective employees. With personal profiles available on most social networking sites, you as the employer have the ability to examine prospective employees' sites and weed out any that do not seem to fit your company's mission or agenda. Prospective employees should ensure their social network profiles are professional and free of any questionable content. Social networking sites are also great vehicles for users to develop stronger relationships with prospects and customers, and often remove geographic barriers from business.

"I recently connected a marketing person in my (LinkedIn) network to a very good friend of mine in Tennessee. The marketing person found my friend through our LinkedIn page. If he hadn't proactively asked for that introduction, I would have never considered them a good business match," said Michael.

Most social networks provide forums or groups for like-minded individuals to discuss common topics, hobbies, views, etc. Within these forums or groups, the user is able to ask questions as well as generate answers spotlighting you as an expert on the subject and potentially garnering prospective clients.

Because social networking is relatively new to those in the business world, it is important to avoid many of the unfavorable applications so be wary of which social networks you join and how you utilize those that you do. It is important that you maintain a professional profile when using a social network for business

purposes. Be very careful to avoid an overlap between professional and personal relationships via your social networking sites. Ensure that you have a clear agenda and purpose for utilizing a social network.

"It is important to understand who your customer is. If you are a business-to-business company, then a 'social' site is not the way to go and I would recommend LinkedIn or Plaxo. If your company is business-to-consumer, then it may be advantageous to have a 'social' site," said Mark Obermeyer, publisher of Kentuckiana Business Forum.

Mark utilizes LinkedIn and Plaxo to maintain his business connections as well as Classmates.com to keep connected with high school friends.

Additionally, while social networks act as a great lead facilitator, they also act as a lead source for recruiting firms. As an employer, you should be aware of this.

Social networking is the wave of the future for making valuable business connections. If you are not taking advantage of this resource, you could be losing out on potential clients, employees, leads and essentially profits.



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Social networking is no longer just for an audience who doesn't remember the fall of the Berlin Wall; it has become a new sensation in business networking circles with the number of "connections" or "friends" being just as important as the number of business cards in your rolodex.

Here is a list of the big names on the Web. For a more thorough examination of these sites, visit www.promoterinc.com/tips.htm.

Classmates.com is a resource for users to connect and keep in touch with friends from kindergarten through college. The site is free, but offers more advanced applications and services to members for a minimal fee. www.classmates.com

LinkedIn is a professional, business networking site aimed at building connections with like-minded business people who may otherwise be out of reach. The site is free, but offers premium services to power users for a fee. www.linkedin.com

Facebook allows for individuals to connect with friends and colleagues as well as meet new people with similar interests or friends in common. While this site is very popular among individuals of all ages, its business functions are limited. www.facebook.com

MySpace continues to be popular among users of all ages, cultures and socio-economic status. While being a popular social networking site, it is also home to viruses, spam and questionable content including a large underbelly contingent. www.myspace.com

Second Life operates as a virtual world for computer users and can be used as a means of business-to-business communications and a way for businesses to connect with their customers. However, some security concerns exist within this system including how to guarantee confidentiality. www.secondlife.com