



Social networking is ready for business. Are you?

By Patrick Byers

Call me a geek. I read a lot of blogs. I participate in four social networking sites. And with my launch of the Responsible Marketing Blog, I'm doing a fair amount of blogging. But I was shocked when I realized how many of Outsource Marketing's clients and friends of the firm still haven't gotten their feet wet with social media. After all, the evidence is in, and it's overwhelming: Social networking is no longer a fad. It has created a massive societal shift in the way people connect, communicate and collaborate.

Consider this: With 110 million active users, one in four Americans now has a MySpace account. In Great Britain, you are more apt to have a MySpace account than own a dog. And over half of Facebook's 60 million active users return every day.

Have you made the leap yet?

Perhaps you've been standing on the sidelines because you believe social networking is just for young people, has little business application or it takes too much time. Or maybe you just aren't comfortable with networking. Let's take those ideas point by point:

Social networking sites are just for young people

85 percent of MySpace users are over age 18. The fastest growing Facebook segment: people over 25 years old. And the vast majority of LinkedIn's users are age 30 to 55.

Social networking sites are for personal use, not business

Business can't happen without people. And as long as there has been commerce,

networking has been one of the primary methods of business-building.

Big business is embracing social media. They've recognized their customers, employees, prospects, and competitors are all congregating online—and they don't want to be left out of the conversation.

In fact, when asked, "How important is social media to your business/marketing strategy?," 66 percent of the Inc. 500 businesses surveyed said it was either somewhat or very important.¹

Social networking takes too much time

It certainly can, and very well may displace something else you do regularly. But it will be by choice, the same way you might choose to read a book instead of listening to music or watching TV.

Social networking in business doesn't have to be particularly time-consuming. I'll share a few simple that will help you "do" social networking in 10 minutes or less per day. Seriously.

I'm not good at (or I hate) networking

I've done a lot of consulting with law and accounting firms over the years. Most of the new business in professional services firms comes from a small number of rainmakers. The remaining 75 to 90 percent of the firm struggles with networking and business development mightily.

Coaching, sales training, personal marketing plans and incentive-laden compensation plans may yield limited success, but an introvert is never truly in his or her comfort zone while networking. That is, unless that networking is being done online.

Since the mid-nineties, tech-comfortable attorneys have made hay by leading or participating in bulletin boards and discussion groups. In this safe environment, they can provide advice, thereby positioning themselves as experts—without having to schmooze. Now everyone on the team can contribute to biz-dev.

It's for this reason I call social networking sites "personality leveling tools." You don't have to be a social butterfly with a type A personality to succeed.

Already a great schmoozer? Social networking can enhance and/or replace some of your current networking efforts. After all, how many rubber chicken dinners can one person eat?

Getting started

Step one: Get your contacts in shape with Plaxo

All social networking site setup starts with an import of your address book. Problem is, most people have several address books. One in Outlook or Entourage, plus their web mail accounts.

It's for this reason, I always recommend the first social networking site you use is Plaxo.

Started as an address book tool back in 2002, Plaxo helps you aggregate all of your address books into one secure place. It recognizes everyone in your address book based on their email addresses and magically syncs their contact information in your address book. Sweet.

With this feature set alone, I consider Plaxo an essential business tool.

But Plaxo has evolved over the last year or so. With the release of Plaxo

¹ 2007 University of Massachusetts Dartmouth survey

Pulse, they're taking direct aim at Facebook. Plaxo's web interface makes it easy to connect with and share information with people in your network and build online relationships with others. You can search for online friends based on the schools you've attended, companies you've worked for and of course, with the folks in your address book.

A favorite Plaxo feature is the ability to join and create groups that can be public, semi-private or private. Based on their posts, you can request a connection with anyone in that group. There are thousands of groups, with more being created daily.

Step two: Get linked in with LinkedIn

Hands-down, the leading social networking site for business is LinkedIn. The site helps you bring together and develop your professional network.

After importing your address book, you'll be able to see people you know who are already in LinkedIn and send them a connection request. If they accept it, you'll be connected. And quality connections are very good thing.

You can invite your entire address book whether they are on LinkedIn or not, but I wouldn't advise it. To some, social networking is numbers game, as if the person with most superficial relationships wins. I urge quality over quantity when it comes to social networking. Send a connection request to your best contacts—using your own criteria what 'best' is. Birds of a feather, you know. LinkedIn also has the uncanny ability to suggest connections with people it believes you know . . . and it's usually right!

LinkedIn works from the "Six Degrees of Separation" model—that everyone in the world is no more than six people away from everyone else. After using LinkedIn for about four years, I believe this is true.

LinkedIn's strength lies in its ability to help facilitate meetings between people who have never met before. Let's say I wanted to do a keynote on Responsible Marketing for an American Marketing Association chapter in New York, and learned on their website that the head of

programming was Beth Jones. I could call Beth totally cold and try and sway her with my wit and wisdom.

Or, I could search for her on LinkedIn. Since LinkedIn is beginning to reach critical mass, there's a very good chance she's on it. I'd send Beth a note through someone we were both connected to. For Beth to receive it, my contact would have to approve my request and forward it along. Sometimes that forward might daisy-chain through two to three people but since each person that's using it is connected, about 87 percent of all contact requests are successful.

Step Three: Get an account with one of the largest social-networking sites

Since Facebook and MySpace are the 800-pound gorillas of social networking (with the largest number of active users), you should consider an account with at least one of them.

MySpace was originally a place for bands. The layout isn't as simple or clean as Facebook, so I use the latter. If you are in the entertainment business, you should definitely go with MySpace. Of course, it's okay to use both, but you should stay focused on one if you are just getting started.

Facebook was originally developed as an online tool to share pictures from yearbooks, hence the name. Growth trends point to Facebook surpassing MySpace as the most popular social networking site by the end of 2008, with some estimates going as high as 200 million active users. This meteoric growth won't come from just college students—Facebook already is in nearly 90 percent of U.S. universities. Growth will come from older users and users outside the United States.

The functionality I mentioned with Plaxo is all here. With Facebook, you can upload pictures; publish notes; stay up-to-date with your colleagues, clients and friends; join networks and more. With over 6 million groups, surely there are groups of people that you'd benefit from connecting with. If you can't find one, you can create one yourself in minutes and invite anyone you want to join.

A few other tips

Social media can be addicting. Once you set up these sites, you'll find it's easy to get sucked in. Sign in at the frequency that works best for you. I log in once or twice a day and allocate 10 minutes to check messages, comment on postings, or add content.

If you are like me and work with several web-based applications at once, consider using the Firefox browser's "bookmark all tabs" feature. All the sites you work with regularly can be opened with one click.

Since people are joining these sites at a fevered pitch, go back to the "invite friends" section of the site with some regularity. I do this about every two weeks and discover between two and 10 new friends each time.

Last, if connecting with friends and colleagues is important to you, consider adding links to your email signature.

Somewhere right now, there's someone online talking about *Star Wars*... or green products. The latest Britney Spears breakdown...or the packaging options for a new frozen food product. They need legal advice, help finding the best beauty school, or the best way to get gum out of their poodle's hair. And they are also talking about products and services—possibly yours.

Are you ready to join the conversation? If you aren't, I guarantee there's someone else who is—your competition. Besides, I need some more geeks to connect with.

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Patrick writes, blogs and speaks on Responsible Marketing. His book on the topic will be published in 2008, but you can visit the Responsible Marketing Blog now at www.responsiblemarketing.com.

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