



LINKEDIN 101: HOW TO PUT SOCIAL NETWORKING TO WORK FOR YOU

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SOCIAL NETWORKING HAS REVOLUTIONIZED THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE AND SHARE INFORMATION WITH ONE ANOTHER. VARIOUS SOCIAL NETWORKING WEB SITES ARE USED BY MILLIONS OF PEOPLE EVERYDAY ON A REGULAR BASIS, AND IT NOW SEEMS THAT SOCIAL NETWORKING IS A PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE.

The main types of social networking services are those that contain directories of some categories (such as former classmates or professional colleagues), the means to connect with friends, and recommender systems linked to trust. The most popular networking Web sites include MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn. Of these, LinkedIn (a recommender system) has become the business networking tool of choice.

WHAT IS LINKEDIN?

LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is a business-oriented professional networking site that gives users access to people, jobs and opportunities on a scale previously unknown with millions of users in North America, Europe and Asia. LinkedIn allows registered users to maintain a list of contacts and personal details about people they know and trust in business. The people on each list are called "connections." Users can invite anyone to become a connection, whether or not they are site users.

This so-called "gated access" approach, where contact with any user requires either a pre-existing relationship or connection to a contact of theirs, is designed to build trust among the network's users. LinkedIn depends heavily on the concept of trust, counting on its members to maintain the privacy of other users and to not take advantage of the network for selling purposes.

LinkedIn was launched in May 2003 and has experienced viral growth ever since. As of December 2007, the site recorded 3.2 million visitors per month, growing at an annual rate of approximately 485 percent. LinkedIn recently reported more than 20 million registered users spanning 150 industries. The site also offers thousands of group networks for users with like interests.

There's no question LinkedIn is a popular networking tool, but how do you know if it is appropriate for you or your organization?

NETWORKING MADE EASY

The greatest power LinkedIn offers users is the ability to keep in touch with or find new colleagues. It allows you to build up a contact network of your direct connections, the connections of each of their connections (second-degree connections) and also the connections of second degree connections (third-degree connections).

In fact, it was for that very reason that Sherry Budziak, president of .orgSource, joined LinkedIn. She now has more than 150 connections in her LinkedIn network.

"I have been on LinkedIn for a little over a year and it definitely helps me to keep up with my professional contacts as well as allow me to get reconnected to people I have lost touch with," she says. "And, from a consulting perspective, it helps me to keep in touch with sales representatives of the different vendor companies I do business with. I also use some of the LinkedIn groups to help keep current with the latest technologies and trends. For example, I currently participate in a SharePoint users group that is part of LinkedIn for Associations."

Your LinkedIn network of connections can also be used in these ways:

- Use it to find jobs, people and business opportunities recommended by someone in your contact network.
- Employers can list jobs and search for potential candidates.
- Job seekers can review the profile of hiring managers and discover which of their existing contacts can introduce you.

If these capabilities appeal to you, how can you join LinkedIn?

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JOINING THE NETWORK

You can join LinkedIn directly on the site or by being invited to join by an existing user or group. When you join the network, you are given the chance to build a personal profile for yourself, including name, location, e-mail address, current and prior jobs, professional training and education, associations and awards as well as interests. You also may post professional recommendations and a photo.

You are able to control how you receive "InMails," which let other LinkedIn users contact you directly, as well as introductions facilitated by other users. You also may display any LinkedIn groups you

may belong to as well as your private RSS feeds. You can control who can view your personal information, making it visible only to the connections in your network.

SHOULD I JOIN/START A GROUP?

In addition to building your own individual connections, you also can join groups of users with interests similar to your own. LinkedIn groups offer extra features to users with a particular interest or professional background and can be built around such common interests as industry and professional organizations, alumni groups, industry conferences, software applications and corporate alumni groups. Groups help members stay in touch with one another, offer access to new business contacts and provide current information about their common interests.

What about establishing a LinkedIn group for your association? There are pros and cons of doing so, but generally they can be helpful.

Beth Ziesenis, of Avenue Z Writing Solutions, says, "In my not-very-social-media-savvy opinion, adding your brand officially to LinkedIn can only help your association. Your members are already using it and other online networking sites. They already know what kind of resources are there. If you're on their social and professional networks as well, you have the potential to enhance your visibility and brand your association as the place the experts belong."

Davin E. Hattaway, CAE, account director, Potomac Management Resources, points out the value-added benefit of these groups. "LinkedIn groups are easy to set up and maintain, and they can be a big value-add for those members who are heavy users of social media," he says. "Group members on LinkedIn can choose to display their groups' logos to their profiles and connections. These 'heavy users' often flaunt these logos like merit badges, since it's a great way for them to distinguish themselves from the masses. This is a great way to better expose your brand to these users' contacts."

The Association Forum of Chicago recently formed a LinkedIn group, with good results. Greg Fine, CAE, Forum director of communications and marketing, says the group went active at the end of March and in the first week alone 65 individuals accepted the invitation to join. To join the Forum LinkedIn group,

go to: <http://www.linkedin.com/e/gis/76991/0445530C52BE>.

“The primary benefit in creating this network is to offer association professionals a way to share a common interest and to find others. It is not a marketing channel,” Fine says. “You don’t have to be a Forum member to join.”

If you would like to create a group of your own on LinkedIn, simply click on “Create a Group.” As group leader or organizer, you submit your group idea for review by the Web site’s customer service team.

Once approved, you then send an invitation to potential members asking them to join.

CAUTIONS

Despite these benefits, there can be drawbacks. One is that some LinkedIn users have abused the network with spam messages. It is important that users fight back against such abuses.

“Early on when I joined, I received a lot of sales pitches,” Fine says. “But the network is self-policing and those who abused the network were quickly dropped. Of all

the social media sites, LinkedIn is surviving because it is a professional network and its users are respectful of the network.”

The other issue is the potential for privacy violations. LinkedIn has a strong privacy policy and urges its users to guard carefully the privacy of their colleagues. LinkedIn itself does not rent or sell personally identifiable user information to third parties for marketing purposes and states it will never share any individual contact information with another user without his/her consent. However, no system is fool-proof so users are urged not to post any personal information that could be altered or taken without their permission.

FINDING SOLUTIONS

One of the most powerful benefits of LinkedIn is the ability to ask contacts in your network for solutions to professional challenges. The LinkedIn Answers feature leverages the power of the user’s trusted professional network to ask business-related questions and receive industry-specific answers in return.

Miguel Alves Martins, managing partner at Beyond Sustainable Ideas in Portugal, is one LinkedIn user who put this feature to good use. He first heard about LinkedIn when he came to Chicago last October to attend a class in nonprofit management at Kellogg School of Management. The professors talked about social networks, including LinkedIn. Martins immediately signed up and invited all of his classmates. Today, his LinkedIn network includes more than 500 connections worldwide.

When Martins needed help finding benchmark initiatives around European Community government support of social entrepreneurship and social enterprises, he turned to his LinkedIn network. Within hours of his inquiry, he received multiple responses from individuals throughout Europe and the United States. His connections provided numerous resources including an extensive list of Web sites to visit for information.

Like Martins, many LinkedIn users are finding that the best part of being in the network is that it is there anytime, just waiting to help you find like-minded colleagues or the answers to professional challenges.

Are you LinkedIn? Now may be the time to give it a try. 

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