

Online communities really do work

Networking brings results

It's a given that if you're not networking in some way you're missing potential business opportunities and growth. You never know when a contact can become your advocate or even the decision-maker who chooses to give you the business. Social media (used to network online) provide the potential to network further, deeper and faster. A great way to connect at low cost!

What do they include?

All online networks must, as a starting point, allow users to build up and maintain a list of contact details of people they know and trust in business. This is done by inviting like-minded people (whether a site users or not) to join your contact network. The network can also be used to gain an introduction to someone a person wishes to know through a mutual, trusted contact.

There are many networking platforms online, all allowing you to go at the pace that's right for you. They come in all shapes and sizes but there are a few 'must haves' to look out for:

Profile builder - Your profile is essential to your networking success - the more detail you add the more effective your profile will be, allowing other users to target you and your business according to shared interests.

Invite and Share - every network should come with an 'invitation' engine for you and other existing members to invite new members to join.

Groups – allowing you to establish new business relationships by joining industry, professional, and other relevant groups. Groups can be created under any subject or sector and by any member. Some groups are specialised, dealing with specific industry interest such as how my industry is dealing with SPAM in email marketing whereas others are more generic in nature like business issues such as HR or Accounting.

Discussion Forums – as a group member you can create a threaded discussion to encourage opinions and views in areas of shared interest. These in turn generate deeper connections. When these groups are defined by a local area, many meet outside the virtual world to build further on the social nature of connections.

Blogs – commenting on blogs or the ability to create your own relevant blog within your network group is again important to create visibility and stand out within your group.

Events – and finally you must be able to organise events and easily keep track of who's attending.

Latest Activity - An up-to-the-minute activity 'feed' of everything happening across your network including group discussion overviews and status updates from members.

How to get started

There are a lot of things you can do to get started on the networking front. But remember these online networks don't work for you unless you work at them.

1. Clearly define for yourself what you have to give and what benefits you expect to receive from connecting with people online. This may sound obvious, but it is a critical first step. Deciding your focus is key. Requests for support and connections are most effective when they are very specific. Who do you want to connect with? Which roles? Which industries? And what do you have to offer? Think not only in terms of your business development objectives, but other assets - your contacts and expertise. Write it all down - you're going to need it later.

2. Join some of the general-purpose business networking sites. This will get you familiar with the practice and help you start making some connections. See below for examples.

3. Create a profile. Remember, much of the benefit of online networking is that you can build your business 'passively', by creating an attractive profile for yourself. Photos are important, but take care to pick one which presents the image you want to convey to others. Most sites will let you poke around as a guest without setting up a profile first. But when you're ready to set up your own, do it properly and fully. Most sites have some way of showcasing new members, so if you set up an empty profile, you're missing out completely on this additional exposure and potentially damaging your reputation.

4. Participate. You can't reasonably expect to derive value from a networking site unless you are also willing to create value. Watch for opportunities to contribute your expertise to the conversation - whether it's a simple post on a discussion thread or a comment on a blog - or even to make connections between two other people, just as you would want others to do for you.

5. Focus. Time is precious and you want to get a return on your activity. Identify the niche communities where the people who interest you are active. Your best avenue for finding these niche communities is to connect with some of the people in that target group in the larger, public networks, get to know them, and then find out where else they connect.

6. Pull, don't push too hard. Focus on awareness, not persuasion. Your participation and your profile will create awareness. Those who are interested will be attracted to you and will come to you for information and assistance.

7. Be consistent. Long gaps in your participation will be noticed, and if your participation conveniently peaks for the two weeks before your marketing campaign, people will see it as manipulative.

Where to start

Find some general-purpose networking sites to begin to make contacts. Some of the best ones for business development purposes are LinkedIn, Ning, Facebook, Plaxo, Xing and Google's Buzz.

A good place to start is LinkedIn.com. Seen as the premier social networking vehicle for business purposes, it has over 60 million users in over 200 countries. Although sometimes perceived as a career-building platform, it has now become accepted as the best place to get started and participate. It allows you to connect at an individual or group level.

An increasingly popular platform is Ning. Relatively new to the UK, Ning allows you to create your own networking site and re-brand it to fit your corporate identity. This is known as 'white label' functionality. With a little initial technical help, you can also have full control over the layout of the main page and the appearance of all of the features, rearranging, removing, adding, and renaming your menus.

Although often seen as a personal social networking space, Facebook is now encouraging industry groups to create a network around a cause or topic. Then you can join or invite others to join this cause as a fan. For example the digital marketing community uses platforms like Facebook to lobby government for more online inclusivity. As with other tools it's a way of introducing people to others who share common interests or goals.

An up and coming network is Plaxo, originally a way to keep, share or trade your address book online. Now their latest offering is Pulse – in which you will be able to create a 'unified' social media experience across the web. With an approved connection, Pulse will make it easy for you to see exactly what your business connections are creating and sharing online.

And let's not forget about good old Google, which recently made a major land grab for the social networking space by launching Buzz with plenty of interesting new features, particularly for mobile users.

Wherever you network online – and whoever with – choose options that are most relevant to your business. Seek out and connect with business leaders and don't forget that often niche social sites or groups will allow you stand out from the crowd more than generic ones.

And finally, let's remember that online networking can and does lead to building new business relationships that ultimately add to the bottom line. It cannot be seen in isolation, however, but just as another tool to add to your marketing mix.

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