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## Be selective about social-networking connections

You've received an "invitation" but this one is not to a professional seminar, opportunity for networking or open house. It's an invitation to join an online social network such as LinkedIn.



GUEST  
 COLUMN

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Lawyers, accountants, bankers and business owners with unanswered invitations languishing in their e-mail inbox are wondering where to start and what to do to get on the social-networking bandwagon. These business-to-business professionals seek to maximize

results with a reasonable investment of their time and energy.

While teens have dominated the social-networking Internet space via Facebook and MySpace for years, top users now are actually 30- and 40-something professionals and beyond. A recent Providence Business News reader poll reported that 37 percent of respondents used social networking for marketing purposes.

For companies in the business-to-business marketplace, LinkedIn is the best fit for business-building and is designed to attract established professionals. A 2009 Associated Press article, citing the Pew Internet & American Life Project, reported that the "median ages of MySpace and Facebook users were 26 and 27 years old, respectively. At the career-focused LinkedIn, it was 40."

### STRATEGY FOR THE B2B SECTOR

Social networking is not a complicated online mystery; it is just another form of networking. While sales gurus looking for qualified leads were the first to conquer the social-networking scene, business owners and service providers are cautiously entering this space with an eye toward using social networking in a very strategic way.

One obvious benefit of social networking is endorsements. In fact, in this challenging economy and competitive marketplace, sometimes an endorsement from a respected colleague or

client is truly the only thing that sets you apart. If you invite a client (or vendor) with whom you have done business into your network, the implied message is that this client endorses you.

In addition to fostering endorsements and creating qualified leads, social networking opens doors to interact with current customers for enhanced client retention, to garner informal market research about a new product or feature, and to renew inactive acquaintances. You can highlight your accomplishments and achievements which, ultimately, builds your credibility and reinforces your experience. And, best of all, social networking is cost-effective, offering a generous return on investment of the busy professional's time and energy.

### WHERE TO START

Sometimes the only way to demystify the social-networking experience is to pick one venue and begin.

The first step on LinkedIn is to fill out your profile. It is tempting to plug in a few facts and get back to it when time permits but, like all the tools in your marketing arsenal, first impressions count. Take the time to shine: Add a picture, cut and paste your professional information from your company Web site, and join one on-line group that suits your industry or expertise.

Next, step back and view your profile page objectively. Be sure your Web site and e-mail address stand out. Use complete sentences with a professional writing style. This is not the forum for "lol" or "brb." Like your Web site and brochure and business card, your profile page reflects directly on you and your business.

### CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge to business owners and professionals is being selective about your connections, especially when seeking endorsements for yourself. While it is easy to "accept" every invitation as an opportunity, don't invite them into your network if you don't know the

caliber or integrity of the individual.

Another mistake is to embellish one's profile to such great lengths that it actually competes with the company Web site. Your site is probably a well-designed sales and marketing tool so don't create dueling Web presences. In fact, many adept social networkers drive traffic to their own company Web site via links to articles and other helpful information on LinkedIn.

### LEVERAGING OPPORTUNITIES

On LinkedIn, one of the easiest ways to generate a buzz is to post answers to questions related to your industry, audience and business. Your comments may be based on opinion, work results, industry experience, etc. Use short, complete sentences and be concise.

Informal market research is another valuable feature of LinkedIn. If you are courting a new client or targeting a large company, search for LinkedIn profiles of the key decision-makers or influence-leaders. You may share a connection ... a customer, a banker, a neighbor ... someone who can vouch for you as a fine and upstanding professional with whom to do business.

Finally, putting people together with no immediate opportunity for your own gain is a central component of LinkedIn. The pay-it-forward philosophy is inherent in social networking ... or networking of any sort. If you see two people who would benefit from meeting, "introduce" them via LinkedIn.

The AP article about professionals using social networking noted that "only 28 percent said they use it to make business or professional contacts and promote themselves at work." But with LinkedIn bragging about one new user per second, that statistic is surely on the rise. ■

**The pay-it-forward philosophy is inherent in social networking.**

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