

Networking Sites Aren't Just Social Anymore*

By Julia D. Pile, CPA, MBA

There used to be a stigma that on-line networking sites were just for socializing and the younger crowd. That isn't the case anymore. Professionals of all ages are finding benefits from the various networking sites and new uses that are just pretty darn interesting.

When one thinks of on-line networking, usually the names Facebook and MySpace come to mind. While they started as social sites, they are beginning to show professional networking capabilities. I have seen businesses invite current or potential clients to become "friends" on these sites to keep up with their latest news and offerings. The benefit to the business is a guaranteed audience that is interested in its offerings, creating a constant presence in the audience's mind. As most marketing firms will tell you, repetition and name recognition is a key to success.

The site that is gaining the most dominance in this market is LinkedIn. There are more than 30 million users on LinkedIn. The premise of LinkedIn is to supply your basic background information and, through that information, link you to others. As your linked network grows, so do the networks of those that are linked to yours. The concept is similar to the movie game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon;" no matter what movie you start with, you can connect through actors to a movie with Kevin Bacon in six moves.

The concept applies to LinkedIn as well. We are all connected to target persons through others in a relatively short number of links. This can be useful in a number of different ways, I will give just three of the many examples:

Targeting clients for your services or products

Let's say there is a particular client and you would like to get your foot in the door. A search can be done on LinkedIn on that target and a list of connections with how far away you are from them will be displayed. You might find that a connection you never even thought of is a first-degree connection to the target person. You can then invite your first-degree connection to introduce you to that person. Keep in mind though, while electronic introductions are convenient, picking up the phone and talking to a person can be more productive and adds that personal touch.

Looking for a vendor for a particular service

This is the way I usually use online networking. I have a particular need to fill for our law firm. I can perform a search on the industry which may fill my need. I can then view my various connections to see if I know anyone who may be in that industry or connected to someone in that industry. I can also post a question in the questions area or in one of the groups to which I am a member. I usually receive responses within a matter of hours.

Employment opportunities or recruiting

I have had much success in this area on the recruiting side. We were in need of a receptionist and we had not been receiving well-qualified candidates through the usual mechanisms. I posted a position in the Cincinnati LinkedIn group. A professor at a local college picked up on it, routed it to his students and

now we have a wonderful addition to our staff. From the recruiter side, the site can be used to target active and passive job seekers. Passive candidates are those who are not really looking for a job but are open to new opportunities if they should present themselves. A recruiter can quickly do a search on key words or qualifications and find candidates who may very well fill their needs. And if they are lucky enough to come across one with recommendations already on their profile, they have very easy reference checks. If you find yourself in this arena, it is a good idea to connect to a couple of LION (LinkedIn On-Line Networkers) who have hundreds of connections and are always accepting new connections and they are a quick way to build your network.

LinkedIn has a very nice front page which you can modify to follow what is going on with your connections or groups. There are daily updates of who has new connections. You just may find one that you know and forgot about. It is a good idea to periodically update your information or add information so that your profile stays fresh, just as you would your website. Also, remember to personalize your LinkedIn profile address and include it in your e-mail signatures. And make use of the Status area. This is a place where you can type in a quick sentence noting your current project or workload. If you are connected to me, you would have seen that I was working on this article. This is a nice feature because every time you update your status, it displays on each of your connection's front pages. This plays right into the repetition factor of marketing.

The various groups on LinkedIn are invaluable resources. I personally belong to groups such as LinkedCincinnati (which is very active and informative), Linked Northern Kentucky, Association of Legal Administrators, Juris, The Green Group and a few others. Whatever your area of interest or expertise, there is a group for you to join. You can post questions and responses, and the more you post, the more your name is seen and the more you will be recognized as a resource. Also, you can help increase your ratings for your organization's website in the search engines by including your signature in your postings. Most of these postings are archived and are accessible by the search engines.

There are so many ways to use Linked In that I could fill pages and I haven't even touched on the other sites such as Twitter, Plurk and Ping. Ping is a site which allows you to update all your networking sites in one place. What a timesaver!

Julia D. Pile, CPA, MBA is the Operations Manager at Drew & Ward Co., LPA. She is a member of the Greater Cincinnati Association of Legal Administrators and currently serves as the newsletter editor and treasurer-elect. She can be found on LinkedIn at <http://www.linkedin.com/in/juliapile>.

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