

Get ahead in a tough market - harness the power of social networking

It is hard to imagine a world in which there was no Facebook, Myspace or Plaxo. The new age of communication has provided new tools for networking potentially putting you in contact with thousands of people, that were unthinkable in the past. However, many businesses are not capitalising on the benefits these forms of communication provide fearing they will only promote poor time management, a drop in productivity and conflict in the workplace. Below is our guide to get social networking sites working for your company.

Select the right network

Although in essence all social networking sites provide, the same opportunity to communicate to people who could have a specific interest in you or your product offering, the core segment of users differs dramatically across the board. For example, online networks such as Linked In and Plaxo are used primarily in a business context, whereas Facebook is used on a personal level. The key here is before you choose which network you become part of, you need to set out your aims and objectives and from these decide the most appropriate network to join. Joining all networks for the sake of it can be both a waste of time and reflect badly on you or your company if not managed, as we explore below.

Keep your site current

A common problem occurring with these networking sites is that organisations and their employees join up but forget to update and change their pages - so they become quickly outdated. This is an issue on two counts: firstly sites such as Linked In and Plaxo are often used and looked at by recruiters, clients and possible clients. Therefore they should almost be set up as an extension of your company's website, or your company's online CV.

The second problem is if you fail to respond to the communication of other users whether clients, or potential clients, this can impact on your relationship. They may feel you don't think they are important or quite simply you don't care.

A good way around this is to select appropriate networking sites which fit your business objectives, but also by allocating an individual to be in charge of monitoring and updating your company's profile regularly.

Use the links

One of the biggest advantages social networks produce is the ability to be in contact with thousands of people. Having just one friend allows you access to build relationships with their list and build up your own list of friends and clients. The more friends and links you have, the bigger the endorsement for your company. This builds on the 'seven degrees of separation' philosophy.

Point them in your direction

You have done all the hard work getting potential customers and clients onto your social network, so don't lose them here! Maintain a call to action and add links to point them towards your company and your offering.

Privacy

An important consideration to make when using social networking sites for your business is issues around privacy. Never post private information about yourself unless you are happy and willing to have people get in touch with you. There have been occasions where people posted information they thought would only be accessed by a few people but ended up in the mainstream media, such as the recent scandals with sporting stars. A way around this is controlling the privacy settings options on the sites. Through this tool you are able to control who has and who does not have access to various information on your site - and you can choose who to be contacted by and what updates you see.

Social Networking sites provide a unique opportunity for businesses to connect with both current and potential customers. It is a relatively easy, free and convenient tool which can be used by all businesses to help them get ahead in a tough market, however large or small.

Social Networking Sites:

- Plaxo Pulse
- Linked In
- Facebook
- MySpace
- Twitter