

Socially Network Yourself to Success



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Overview

This article examines the social networking tools Facebook and Twitter, and their use for business or professionally.

Should you be using Facebook or Twitter? What should you be writing about? How often? Will it really add any value to your professional life? And the big one for many of us—how to find the time? If this sounds familiar, you are probably not alone. While GenY probably doesn't ponder these questions, adults trying to run a business or earn a living are more likely to consider activities such as writing a regular online update as just one more thing on a long list of 'to dos'. However ignoring the social media movement won't make it go away. Marketing consultant Clare Lancaster (Nett Magazine 2009), writes that social media is very important for any business and that it's changing the way people use the Internet and their expectations of websites.

At its simplest, social networking describes how individuals use online technologies and practices to create content such as opinions, insights and experiences and share it over social media on the Internet. At its most powerful, it can be (in the words of Clare Lancaster) 'a modern day form of word of mouth marketing on steroids'. In fact a recent 2009 study by media research firm Nielsen reported that that two-thirds of the global Internet population visit social networks.

Facebook

Social network sites such as Facebook give people the ability to maintain a page online for keeping in touch with their network of friends, family or customers and sharing information, video and photos. Facebook is the dominant social networking tool in Australia and the second most visited website in the world. Facebook's statistics page quotes more than 300 million users, with the fastest growing demographic the 35-plus group. There are also slightly more female than male users. Facebook was originally created for American college students to keep in touch with each other, and while most Facebook users maintain personal pages, businesses are now staking claim to Facebook as a less formal way of keeping in touch with clients and customers.

Facebook has two aspects: the Facebook profile which is the personal page, and the Facebook page, intended as a business or professional platform. People who follow or join a profile page are known as friends, while those who follow a business page are known as fans. Without fans the search engines such as Google will not rank your page very highly and neither will Facebook's business page directory. You can invite only existing friends to become fans, so in order to attract more fans to

your Facebook page you need to think of other ways to promote it; such as using the free Facebook badge link which you can include on your website or in your emails.

The Facebook page has what is known as a wall. This is the space where people can write comments or messages and where your own communications appear. Your Facebook page needs to be active and engaging and provide something of value to those who visit it. This could be posting newsletters, hosting discussions providing links to articles, videos and websites or writing tips relevant to your industry or business. Ideally, your page will work on the principle of a two-way conversation between yourself and your fans or followers and must be based on interaction and not just pushing out your message. As well, the Facebook page must be regularly updated. If you only add news or updates sporadically, there's nothing to keep readers engaged—and worse, it makes it look like you are not that invested or interested in your business or product.

Small businesses without a web presence may consider setting up a Facebook profile or page as a no-cost way of connecting and advertising online. A personal profile page should be set up prior to a business page, as, the search engines won't rank the business page unless you have a personal profile set up first. If you want to use your own or your business name, register it under the username link in Facebook before someone else beats you to it. Consult the settings and help files in Facebook for more information.

One thing that I cannot stress enough is that there is a very big difference between having a Facebook page where you and your friends share photos of you passed out after a bottle of wine, and maintaining a Facebook page or other online space which showcases your business, brand or service. People confuse the two media. Of course there is nothing wrong with having a Facebook page where you and your friends say silly things and put up less than flattering photos—however, you do not need the rest of the world to see this, especially not your customers or potential clients, so it is best to keep these two worlds separate. It is becoming more and more common for would-be employers or customers to search the Internet for information on folk they may consider doing business with or employing, and while you cannot control what your friends post on their social networking sites, what you make public should only be what you would be happy for a potential client to see. See staying private on Facebook below.

I have a Facebook account but I have set it up so that only my close friends and family have permission to access my profile. For business communications I maintain a website, a blog and am establishing a separate Facebook page to promote my business. My blog is open to the world and it focuses on my professional achievements, work and interests and my Facebook page is about my business—and I try not to let the (very) personal and professional 'me' become confused online.

Twitter

Twitter is what is known as a Microblogging tool. Twitter's annual growth-rate in Australia in the past 12 months is said to have been 3,200%, with 60% of users 35-plus. It is regarded as an excellent source of word-of-mouth advertising, but the flip-side is that it can also generate negative press.

When you set up a Twitter account you can then post up to 140 characters of information in a similar way to a text message, so users tend to adopt a fairly casual style. 'Tweets', as these communications are known, can be read online or via mobile phone. Once online with Twitter, the recommended strategy is to locate people who are associated with your profession, industry or cause—market leaders, those who work in the industry, those having conversations around the issues that interest you (.e.g learning and development, resource management, e-learning)—and to make a link to them (known as following). Just like posting in Facebook, Twitter works on engagement, so to become a part of this online community and build up your own following you will need to make comments on what others have said, respond to remarks and engage in conversations and exchanges of information with other Twitter users interested in the same issues. Twitter has a tool called Tweetdeck that can be downloaded to enable filtering and searching of messages from like-minded people, to make it easier to link to them. If you are consistent, useful and interesting you should eventually build followers; however, it can take between 6–12 months for this occur. Professionals say that a person needs to tweet 4–5 times daily over this period as any less than this will fail to foster engagement with other Twitter users.

Strategies for Using Social Media Tools for Business:

The best strategy for gathering and keeping followers in Twitter, and fans or friends on Facebook, is to have fresh and creative output. This can include discussion or proactive tips on issues related to your industry, statements and information on what your business is doing, links to other useful and relevant websites and blogs in your industry and links to articles. The key words to keep in mind are 'sharing' and 'adding value'.

- Search for, and check up on, what people are saying about your business, brand, industry or issues (accreditation, elearning, resource management). Use Lexicon, a free tool provided by Facebook that allows you to follow language trends and usage of words and phrases on its profiles and pages. In Twitter use the provided search tool.
- Have a clear reason for using Facebook or Twitter—is your primary motive selling, engaging customers or raising awareness?
- Do some research, thinking and planning first to establish what people will find valuable.
- If your purpose in doing this is to drive more traffic to your website, you will need to research some tracking tools to measure the effect that Twitter or Facebook has on your website's traffic. Twitter has one and there is always Google Analytics.

...And Think About:

- Are you prepared to spend the time to maintain a Facebook page or tweet daily?
- Are you ready to dialogue with customers/clients on a regular basis?
- Do you have the resources to make a commitment to your chosen social network? Doing these things takes time and once you begin you need to keep updating, posting or tweeting—and it must be regular. It is not something you undertake for a brief marketing campaign.
- How will you engage with people? On Facebook, you will always need to respond to comments. As well you can host discussions around your customer interests, spend money on offering coupons, give out guides and useful links and content, make exclusive offers, set up contests or give out free applications and widgets (e.g. logos, badges). On Twitter, respond to comments and engage in conversations and exchanges of information with other Twitter users who are interested in the same issues.

However you look at it, maintaining a social networking presence takes time. While you may enjoy using Facebook to catch up with friends and swap gossip, it is completely different to the time, effort and thought needed to maintain a professional social network. With that in mind, it is important to choose a tool that that you are likely to enjoy using. You may also not have the resources to participate in all of them, so pick what you feel works best for you. I've chosen to use my blog in a certain way and my Facebook page in a certain way—and while I have set up a Twitter account, I don't tweet at the moment because I don't have the means to use Twitter the way it should be used.

Blog don't Blab

As this media become more pervasive, debates surrounding security and privacy continue in the face of sensitive information and private photos appearing on social networking sites the world over. Remember the old phrase 'loose lips sink ships', and be careful not to give away critical or inappropriate information about your clients or employer when tweeting or posting. While many organisations in Australia routinely ban any form of social networking access, they can't stop individuals posting sensitive information from their homes and personal computers, so the onus shifts to the individual to think about issues related to the confidentiality of others. Learning and development consultants should remember to keep names and identifying data out of posts if discussing case studies or situations encountered when working with clients, because even if you think you are making a seemingly innocent comment, it may be damaging to the individuals or business concerned. Earlier this year the US Marines banned all forms of social networking sites including Facebook, Myspace and Twitter as they consider them serious security threats.

The key points to keep in mind (whatever medium you choose) are that your communications need to provide something of value (information, ideas, tips) and foster engagement and dialog with followers. People know when they are being sold to, and if your Facebook or Twitter posts are nothing but a string of advertisements, people will quickly lose interest. As the Nielsen report (2009) aptly frames it, 'advertising on a social network is like gate-crashing a party'. However if you are

helpful enough, your social networking credibility can grow substantially, and can only help your professional profile.

Staying Private on Facebook

Take the time to read and understand the **Settings** link in Facebook to help you customise your page, and avail yourself of the free information provided in Facebook's Help. To set who can see what on your Facebook profile page do the following:

1. Click on Settings
2. Choose Privacy Settings. Click on Profile, which takes you to the page where you can choose who sees certain information on your profile.
3. Underneath each section on this page (such as basic info, personal info, status, etc) you are able to designate who sees that particular aspect of information. For example choosing 'everyone' makes that information completely public, while choosing 'friends of friends' lets your friends friends (i.e. strangers) see it.

I can be found at www.angelalewis.com.au, I tweet as AngelaLewisMelb and my Facebook page can be viewed by typing Angela Lewis Consulting into the Facebook Pages search box.

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Twitter www.twitter.com