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Facing the Facebook Revolution: Why PR Execs and Staff Should Get with the Program

By Chris Lukach, Vice President and Co-Owner, Anne Klein Communications Group, LLC



Despite PR firms across the globe espousing the value of Web 2.0, precious few executives at these firms have actually begun dipping their toes into social networking. At the same time, many of the junior staff who already are active with social networks limit their application to keeping up with friends and family.

That's about to change, and that's a good thing. People in business have taken to scanning their rolodexes to send out "friend requests," and all social networks have blossoming professional networking audiences. I should know. Social networking for business caught me by surprise, too.

Though I have been active on both Facebook and MySpace since taking my first PR job (yes, they've been around that long), it was only six months ago that one of my active clients first extended a "friend" invite. I was surprised, and a little torn. Despite being a social-networking evangelist for years, I had limited myself to using it for keeping up with hometown friends and college buddies.

With reluctance, I accepted—then the flood gates opened. Several more clients became friends, plus other professional colleagues. I even began joining groups supporting my professional associations. Soon, my social-networking dynamic had completely changed.

I feared overexposing myself, and crossing some self-imposed professional boundary. I've listened to critics who cite building Facebook relationships with business contacts as getting too personal, and I was pleased to find this really isn't the case.

Connect—Personally, Efficiently, Effectively

There's no question that email and the Web ushered in a new age of business communication—one where civility is often absent; humor is dangerous; and the sign-off "sincerely" doesn't really resonate. In our business landscape, too often business relationships begin with just a phone call or e-mail trail; the well-known advantages of "putting names to faces" are often lost.

But increasingly, the proliferation of social networking sites is hinting at the potential to fix the damage done by our email-driven world over the last two decades. Building relationships with

business contacts on a social networking site is a way to use a virtual environment to connect more personally—to share common interests, learn about each others' backgrounds and personal lives, and much more. Social networking sites are not exactly face-to-face communication, but they can go a long way toward restoring some benefits of face-to-face communication when used appropriately.

Ten minutes on Facebook (or another social networking site of your choice) during a slow point in the day is an easy, efficient way to re-connect with and stay informed about your professional contacts. It's cheaper than lunch and with less awkward silence than an unsolicited phone call. (Plus, it gives you much more to talk about the next time you do connect face-to-face.)

Get Started—Take Your Pick

There are plenty of social networking sites from which to choose—from Badoo to Xanga, and every letter in between—so find the one that's a right fit for you. Currently, MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn are far and away the market leaders, and a great jumping off point. Facebook, once only open to college students, now boasts 124 million members of all ages; MySpace, an unbelievable 246 million; and LinkedIn, 30 million.

LinkedIn is marketed as *the* social networking site for business professionals, but critics (including this author) can't help but find it a bit stuffy. Its primary benefit, the ability to pair with your professional contacts, is interesting, but limited and impersonal. MySpace enjoyed market dominance for some years, and it claims a majority of its members are over the age of 35. But, in recent years, Facebook has been gaining significant steam. I'm of the set that prefers Facebook for professional networking. It strikes the right balance of personality and professionalism.

You will need to exercise a little restraint when building a social network presence. Young professionals especially, take note: When you commit to using social networking sites for professional reasons, err on the side of caution. That means take down the photos from that last bar crawl.

Be smart. A good maxim is, "Don't post anything you wouldn't want your parents to see." Use common sense. Avoid heavy political commentary, talking about how much money you make or how much you may hate your boss or your employees.

But beyond that, the rest is easy. Just be yourself.

My guess? It probably won't be but a few years (months, perhaps) before the day when you log onto Facebook (or the social network of record for that time) to touch base with a client or colleague, instead of reaching for your rolodex or shooting off an email. So why wait? Start building your social network now. And don't be afraid to introduce your contacts to social networking; they'll be glad you did.

It's clichéd to say we're "people" people, but it's true—we wouldn't be in communications if we weren't. So let's take advantage of social networking sites, our renewed opportunity to put personality back in our personal interactions.

Chris Lukach is Vice President and Co-owner of Anne Klein Communications Group, LLC, a national full-service communications firm based in Marlton, N.J., and the Philadelphia office of Pinnacle Worldwide