

marketer

Volume 27, Issue 1, February 2008

The Journal of the Society for Marketing Professional Services

on point

The Faces of Diversity

by Leslie Williams

The Conversation Continues

communications

Listen Generously

by Joan Capelin

media

Record's *Robert Ivy*

by Mike Reilly

small-firm advantage

Does Size Matter?

by Marjanne Pearson

strategy

Getting Unstuck

by Lloyd Bakan

tools

Social Networking

by Mark Buckshon



SMPS

Society for Marketing
Professional Services

Social Networking for Marketers— Where It Stands Now

BY MARK BUCKSHON, CPSM

In the days not long ago, before Web 2.0, the words *social* (or *online*) *networking* would conjure up images of social gatherings where individuals meet and mingle in the hopes (often illusive) of finding new business contacts. Today, the phrase describes Internet resources to accelerate relationships with the people who count—without worrying that you may spill your drink in public.

However, we ask, do services such as Facebook and LinkedIn.com really help professionals and contractors to find new business and employees? According to several SMPS leaders, the answer is mixed. The substance may be less than the promise. But there are signs that the new technologies will be increasingly relevant in the not-too-distant future. They are immediately important if your business or practice needs to connect with younger people who are just graduating from college or university.

My previously limited interest in this matter recently increased exponentially when I purchased a job listing on LinkedIn.com to recruit a key sales employee. This followed months of frustration elsewhere, when our company received hundreds of applications with none meeting our particularly stringent screening requirements.

We received just two responses from LinkedIn.com. One proved to be so far out of zone geographically and qualification-wise, I thought I had just wasted my company's \$150. But the other candidate, the one we hired, proved to be the right person for the work.

Our new employee is a recent university graduate and fits the profile of the generation that typically has hundreds of online friends. People like me of another generation would put these "friends" in quotation marks, but the current college-age generation, who grew up tethered (well, now in a wireless way) to the Internet, thinks differently. They're usually intelligent enough to maintain some degree of privacy, using the online resources to screen and categorize their friends. Yet they still enjoy constant interaction within their community as dozens of e-mails, video clips, and text messages flood in each day.

Certainly, the need for A/E/C businesses to attract talented young employees is one reason senior managers within the industry are starting to experiment with social networking resources.

"We are interested in making our firm more visible to the pool of potential young architects and engineers who are looking for the place they want to begin in or move into in their careers," says **Craig Park, FSMPS, Associate AIA**, vice president and chief marketing officer for Leo A Daly and a Past National President of SMPS. "We've started a number of programs in that area, with YouTube and MySpace and even a Wiki (i.e., Wikipedia), sharing knowledge across a group of interested associates."

"At this point it's all experimental," Park added. "I wouldn't say that we've really been successful (yet)." In fact, Leo A Daly YouTube videos were still in production at the time of writing this article.

Ford Harding, President of Harding & Company, is at the other end of the generational spectrum. Author of the well-regarded book *Rain Making: The Professional's Guide to Attracting New Clients*, Harding isn't sure exactly how valuable the social networking resources are.

Certainly the speaker, author, and consultant is well connected and understands networking at the highest level—he has more than 200 "first-degree" connections on LinkedIn.com. Harding says, "The pony is in there somewhere, but I haven't found it."

"I don't think anybody's found the magic tool to get over the fact that networking and referrals are a very personal thing," he said. "I think [online networking] will never become as powerful a tool as sitting down with somebody, looking him or her in the eye, and assessing the character."

Harding sees some value in the online networking systems in the first sign-up or referral stage, because this point of contact attracts attention and provides a valid reason for a more personal or direct form of connection or reconnection.

"In the sign-up process, you update your information on the Net, and sometimes that leads to something," he said. "A few

people have used the sign-up process very creatively to get more of that impact from it.”

Harding says the online connections are most effective when the person seeking the relationship is in the same community. “People who work a narrow geographic market area have an easier time using these tools,” he says. “It’s easier to establish face-to-face contact with someone met through social networking and get it beyond the electronic relationship, which is fairly cold to start with.”

Linkedin.com works on the principle that virtually everyone in the world can be connected through six degrees of separation. The service takes users as far as the third separation degree. In my case, the result is the astronomical number of more than 1,005,200 “connections”—with 999,100 third-degree connections—where supposedly you can “reach these users through a friend and one of their friends.”

Now, it is handy to know I have 31 first-degree connections. These are people I know personally. Theoretically, their network of more than 5,000 first-degree connections (my second-degree connections) could bring me close to someone relevant for my business. However, the problem for me and most experienced networkers is that a name in a database has no real value until there is some purpose in the connection. And blindly bugging my first-degree connections for leads would be bad manners, indeed.

Harding, with his visibility and much larger group of contacts, faces the problem of people he doesn’t really know asking him for referrals and recommendations through the online channels. “I’ve received several e-mails myself seeking contacts through the network,” he said. “I don’t feel any particular desire to get into discussions with these people.”

“If somebody I know contacts me and says, ‘This is a very good person,’ then I would call them. Just contacting me with no introduction, except a pass-through—I’m very unlikely to do anything. There’s something very personal about networking and referrals. You are putting your reputation on the line. And if the person comes without strong recommendations, you are very unlikely to put your [own] reputation on the line.”

Still, Harding and I both follow best practices in the social networking era. We are visible within the online forums and maintain frequently updated blogs. (His is at <http://hardingco/blog> and mine is at <http://www.constructionmarketingideas.blogspot.com>.)

Meanwhile, SMPS National President-Elect **Dana Birkes, APR, FSMPS, CPSM**, vice president at The Flintco Companies Inc. in Tulsa, OK, says that some old-style social networking resources within SMPS work wonders for relationships and business development.

SAVE THE DATES



**BUILD
BUSINESS™**
INNOVATE TO ELEVATE

August 6–9, 2008
Hyatt Regency Denver at
Colorado Convention Center
Denver, CO

The premier business development, management, and marketing conference designed to educate and connect A/E/C industry leaders.

Hosted by the Society for Marketing Professional Services and the Professional Services Management Association

www.buildbusiness.org

32 Social Networking Tips

Here are some simple guidelines for using online social networking resources.

- Right now, the strongest contenders for networking on a public/large scale are LinkedIn.com and Facebook.com. If you are not already on these sites, you will likely find friends and acquaintances there. Since sign-up is free, it won't hurt to join.
- Obviously be responsible and careful about what you post on public sites; you never know when your inadvertent posting of private information in public will come to haunt you. Most readers of this journal will be savvy enough to avoid Internet scams and identity theft schemes, but you should still use common sense in disclosing your personal information.
- There are arguments in favor of the "more the merrier." Ford Harding, for example, suggests a few people at the top of the "power curve" with many thousands of online connections may in fact reap real benefits from these forums. But you are probably more likely (and realistically able) to achieve success by using your skills and talents to move to the top of a more niche-related "power curve;" in other words, unless you are a true one-in-a-million online networker, just piling on the online connections is likely to produce little of value for your business or career development.
- Nevertheless, despite these points, it is helpful to inject your personality into the process. You need to show enough of yourself for people to get a flavor of you, and to feel confident and connected.
- If you are recruiting or working with younger people (or expect to in the future), you will want to pay serious attention to online networking resources. College-age people and young employees use social networking systems differently than older people; they find it natural and easy to connect to hundreds of people. Plus they are especially comfortable in the multi-media environment where personal images and pictures link within their community and special interest groups. This is one situation where senior executives may benefit from some mentoring from the newest employees on the company's payroll.

The SMPS Listserve, which provides an opportunity to link and share ideas by e-mail, is several years old. Although it clearly lacks the public visibility and data storage power of newer social networking sites, and can clog up e-mail in-boxes with messages, it still works. So do more conventional resources, such as the print and online membership directories, and of course the opportunity to network at the chapter level. Those who wish to get even more involved can do so at regional and national conferences.

Craig Park says that he gains real value from closed networking groups such as the listserv for SMPS Fellows—which allows for confidential, high-level discussions. He is now exploring creating a closed social networking site (www.virtualcmo.ning.com) for senior-level marketers; the idea is not to invite everyone to the party but to know and trust whoever is there.

These views are also influencing SMPS' acceptance of the new electronic resources. SMPS senior vice president **Lisa Bowman** says SMPS is carefully reviewing new tools that facilitate communication between members, while retaining the trust and exclusivity that membership provides. The decision to pay dues, and to belong to a local SMPS chapter, already incorporates some discipline and screening into the relationships. Members are committed to marketing professional services and have common interests before they meet, either electronically or personally.

Nevertheless, Dana Birkes and others still see some usefulness in the public networking sites, if only to reconnect and renew old acquaintances and friendships. "We are always short on time," she notes. "Whom you know is what you know. It's another tool to keep you up to date without spending huge amounts of personal time to track people down."

Certainly, the biographical information and data on places like LinkedIn.com and Facebook can provide valuable insights into people you are about to meet or wish to be near. You might notice that an old friend has risen to a senior position and could legitimately help you, now that you know where he or she is.

But would you care to develop a close and binding relationship with someone who simply sends you a boilerplate invitation from an online service? Not likely.

Birkes had received my invitation for a LinkedIn.com connection several days before I discussed this topic with her on the phone. Lisa Bowman had suggested I call her, so I certainly wasn't calling cold. While on the phone, Birkes mentioned she had received my request to connect with her through LinkedIn.com a few days previously, but not recognizing the name, she had not accepted the link. Now that she knew who I was, she approved the request following our interview. Now I have at least theoretical access to Birkes' 25 first-degree connections.

But will I ever call on any of them? Social networking sites may indeed generate impressive numbers, but for most of us, the real process of building relationships is one by one. And it will remain this way until we learn how to think like the recent graduates we are hoping to hire.

About the Author



Contributing Editor Mark Buckshon, CPSM, is president of the Construction News and Report Group of Companies (www.constructionnrgroup.com), which publishes regional construction newspapers and maintains a network of Canadian and U.S. Web sites. Based in Ottawa, Canada, Mark can be reached at buckshon@constructionnrgroup.com.