

"Survival Guide: Online Social Networking"

By Shally Steckerl

Shally got his start in research in 1996 when he realized that as a contingency recruiter he could beat the competition and make more money by finding people who were not easily available in mainstream sources. Since then he has built several centralized sourcing and research organizations from the ground up for large multinational organizations like Cisco, Motorola, Coke, Google and Microsoft. Shally now spends his time consulting with organizations on how to build research teams and develop their advanced sourcing skills. Visit: <http://www.jobmachine.net/shally> for a complete bio, and to learn more about what Shally has to offer recruiters check out: <http://jobmachine.net/card>

Online social networking provides you with a venue to connect with people whom you already know, grow your relationships and find new people connected to you by a common contact. Effective utilisation of your personal network is no longer a competitive advantage, it is a survival tool.

Although the hackneyed phrase 'it's who you know' has been abused by companies touting their latest and greatest flavour of social networking software, it's not far off the mark. The truth is that in today's over-informed digital business world, where bloated data moves at the speed of thought, it is not who you know that really counts, but who knows you. Professional online social networking tools are invaluable in creating personal brand equity and raising awareness about who you are.

Forging relationships

There is a significant business need for these tools as aids to help us expand our professional influence beyond the Dunbar number. According to theories evolving from Social Networking Architecture research, anthropologist Robin Dunbar's http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunbar's_number estimates that humans can only maintain stable relationships with around 150 people. That number refers to significant relationships such as those in a family or tribe and other purposeful groups.

However, in "The Tipping Point", Malcolm Gladwell explores the Dunbar

number's effects on the dynamics of social groups, and those theories have been popularised and given rise to many business-related applications.

Systems for managing and sharing relationships have been around for a long time. From the original contact management systems like ACT! and GoldMine, to the very first networking sites like sixdegrees.com, they all walk a fine line between sharing too much information and not enough to be of use. However, they have all tried to multiply our ability to maintain business relationships with hundreds, or even thousands, of people.

There is one important weakness in this new generation of collaborative social networking. If users do not trust the system to protect their relationships, then they will not use the application effectively and gain very little incremental advantage from their connections. On the other hand, too much protection limits the effective range or depth of penetration achievable within a user's extended 'friend of a friend' network, thus also limiting the effectiveness of such a network.

Somewhere between those two extremes lies the advantage of a well-utilised and semi-trusted professional social network.

Major benefits

Online social networking software enables you to find quality people

who may not be familiar with you or with your organisation, and creates an opportunity to connect with them and sell them on your opportunities. They may be unfamiliar with your company or business, or may not have even been looking for something.

Because you already know someone who knows them, you can feel more comfortable that they are a quality prospect. Also, because of that mutual connection, you can more easily overcome cumbersome barriers and begin a relationship with a little more trust and warmth than with a total stranger. Like 'six degrees of Kevin Bacon', social networking sheds light on the contacts you never knew you had. Here are some advantages:

You can contact people in your network to:

- Rekindle old connections
- Maximise value in your weak connections
- Build business relationships with clients or hiring managers
- Find and meet prospective jobseekers
- Grow a referral network
- Heighten your corporate and personal brand
- Make new connections and grow your sphere of influence
- Open doors to future career

opportunities, increased pay or promotions

- Increase visibility, which improves influence and effectiveness internally with your organisation as well as externally.

Find new leads for networking into companies to:

- Educate yourself and ask questions about other organisations
- Conduct competitive intelligence on companies, industries or individuals
- Make fewer cold calls and better prepare for them
- Leverage contacts you already have.

Major players

With most services, the initial sign up is free. Users begin by filling out a form with personal data and then inviting friends. Some networks allow for uploading current contacts, but others ask users to invite contacts directly through the application's interface. The connections then invite their own contacts, and that's how the network grows.

There are hundreds of online social networking sites. Most of the applications competing for your attention offer a combination of professional and personal networking. Some are better suited to find a date while others are more seriously oriented to business. After joining and reviewing the top 20 players, three of them stand out:

LinkedIn.com

- Profiles look very much like a cv, excellent mix of people from different levels in the organisation, and many industries
- Endorsements set trusted people apart
- Search for: industry experts, potential employees, hiring managers, deal-makers, people from specific geographies, or people with particular keywords in their profiles
- Particular focus on business networking. Over 8.5 Million members.

Plaxo.com

- Keeps all of your current contacts' information updated automatically thus is extremely useful in rekindling old relationships and staying in touch.
- Not a tool to build your network yet, though it does have a very useful 'mini blog' feature to help you keep friends informed. About 15 million people use Plaxo.

Spoke.com

- Focused on providing sales prospects
- Deeply integrated, extracts contact data from enterprise applications (eg, Outlook, Notes, etc) to establish and leverage connections. About 30 million contacts.

There are so many social networks that they are too numerous to list

in this article. A majority of them, like friendster.com, flickr.com and orkut.com among hundreds of others tend to revolve around strictly social categories like dating, common interests, finding friends and photo sharing. Arguably, community Web logging sites like MySpace.com, Windows Live Spaces, LiveJournal.com and Blogger.com are also networking sites. Here are some other notable networks with a decidedly business or professional purpose, ranked by size:

- Hi5.com - 50 million users. General social networking and business
- Passado.com - 4.7 million users. Europe's largest business network
- Xing.com - 'Crossing' has 4 million users. Was OpenBC. Business networking
- Ryze.com - 250,000 users. Business networking
- Ecademy.com - 100,000 users. Business networking.

Concerns with networking sites

Privacy

- Online networking is safe. The major players are mindful of your privacy. That said, each network has its own privacy policy - so read it, and if you don't like it don't join!
- Uploading your contacts doesn't mean they get to keep them or use them in any way. They use your

contacts only to tell you who is already registered, or to help you with your connections. Be careful, however, because if you invite someone who wasn't already a member and they join now, that person will be available to others who may want to connect directly with them

- If someone gains access to your passwords they could log in and export all your contacts. Use good judgment protecting your account
- Remember, the more you share the more you are exposed. But, you will increase your benefit from the network with more exposure
- The basic concept involves a little trust. I scratch your back, you scratch mine. For the network to be most useful to you there needs to be a little reciprocity. People who are very guarded about their privacy may not get great results from using these networks.

Barriers to entry

- Getting started means investing time to enter your information into the application. This can take anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours, depending on how much you want to get out of using the network. The more you share about yourself the easier it will be to make connections
- If you only upload a few contacts you get very little benefit since these systems only search for connections through people you already know

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- You need to know at least one person with a large network or else you are very limited with whom you can reach. Search for people you know who may already be in the network and ask them for a connection, particularly if they are well connected themselves
- The most challenging barrier is getting people from your 'in person' real life network to sign up. You know they have lots of connections, and they would be willing to help you, but they are not already signed up. If you get them to sign up, you can both benefit from each other's connections, but then you become their mentor and may feel obligated to help them more than you would otherwise.

Maintenance

- If you have a large network you could get to a point where you are getting barraged with requests. The good news is you can turn on or off e-mails about your accounts or from your network, and with some networks you can even change your settings to accept requests from specific levels. The other side of turning off the communication is that you lose out on reminders that help you to remember to groom your network
- Evaluating new 'friends' is difficult. You may get requests from people you don't know or don't remember and it can be awkward to write back telling them you don't remember them. Just like meeting someone in person, you may have to bite the bullet and confront them with a 'have we met?' or you may need to just ignore them
- Don't add everyone indiscriminately. Be just a little picky in adding new friends you don't know. Remember, you are a reflection of your networks. People know you not only by who you are but also by whom you choose to associate.

Integration with software and between networks

- With Plaxo you can export your data in a flat file format making it easy to transfer your contacts to a new application
- Some networks like LinkedIn have useful toolbars that integrate with Outlook and make it easier to keep your network fresh

- With most of the networks you can export your contacts. Do this regularly so that if for some reason your account is lost you can still retain your connection's contact information. You can also take it with you to import it into another network
- Note that it's impossible to synchronise across networks. You may find some of the same people in several networks, but the best strategy is to choose your favourite three or five and stick to them or else you will be spending all your time maintaining several networks.

Losing touch with the 'Real'

- E-mail is very cold and unemotional. Relying on e-mail and similar

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messaging to connect with people can wash out the emotional side of building relationships

- Remember to pick up the phone and call your contacts every once in a while. This way they are more likely to forward your requests, and ask you for requests, making your network stronger.

Free now, pay later?

- Many of these services are not currently charging fees to get started in them but they may begin to impose membership fees for even the basic accounts or activities.

Social Networking is getting involved and getting your name out every chance you get. Like meeting people in person, it can be hit or miss.

The single most powerful advantage of online networking is finding new connections you didn't know you already had. It takes time and energy to build a network, either in person or online. With the Internet we have the ability to reach more people.

Don't be afraid to connect, stay connected, share, participate, be vulnerable, open yourself to the world. Being connected in this way is an incredible leverage that will prove invaluable in your business development. Connections can have many unexpected positive results.

Related FreePint links:

- Social networking collection on ResourceShelf
<<http://digbig.com/4tmhn>>
- "Life of the Party: Social Web Browsers" by Stephanie Taylor
<<http://www.freepint.com/issues/150207.htm#feature>>
- "Social Software in Libraries: Building Collaboration, Communication and Community Online" (book review)
<<http://www.freepint.com/bookshelf/socialsoft.htm>>
- "Recruiter's Guide: Online Social Networking" By Shally Steckerl
<<http://jinfo.com/newsletter/>>

Related links:

- "The Tipping Point" by Malcolm Gladwell
<<http://www.gladwell.com/tippingpoint/index.html>>



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