

Online Social Networking Basics

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What is social networking, and how can it help me professionally?

Social networking is simply the process of connecting with other people who share your personal or professional interests. Although the term achieved popularity through online connections, it's also an offline phenomenon. If you've ever been introduced to someone at a mixer, a cocktail party or a convention, you've already experienced social networking in the offline world.

Online social networking is similar, but more powerful – with the potential to connect with thousands of people. Through the personal and professional relationships you already have, you can reach new prospective clients and referral sources, and market to them.

How do I get started in social networking?

There are hundreds of social networking websites. The top three are LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Start with a free account in one of these. Which one? That depends on the types of people you want to connect with.

If you're primarily interested in meeting other professionals who could potentially refer business to you, use LinkedIn. If you want to reach a more general audience, and to interact with them in a multimedia setting, try Facebook. For brief, text-based communication, you would use Twitter.

The next thing to do is connect with people in your social network. From your **LinkedIn** account page, you can invite colleagues to join your LinkedIn network – either by entering their email address or by searching for them within the LinkedIn website. Those who are already registered on LinkedIn probably have their own network of contacts, whom you may choose to invite as well. You can also search for old classmates and for people in similar or complementary professions.

Facebook is less targeted, but more flexible. You can have a personal page and/or a business page (formerly called a “fan” page.) For purposes of marketing, you'd probably choose the business page, since it provides more options for presenting content, and also does not require mutual “friending.” That is, the people who join your business page, won't have access to content that you want to keep within your immediate circle of family and friends, such as photos of your kids, personal messages, etc.

To get fans on Facebook invite other Facebook users whom you know (Facebook has a search feature.) Also, post a link to your Facebook business page on your website,

in email and in other online communications; and note your Facebook page on your business cards.

For **Twitter**, get started by finding other people or businesses that you want to interact with, and click to “follow” them. Some of them will follow you back. Whenever someone whom you are following posts a “tweet” it will show up on your Twitter account page. Whenever you post a tweet, it will show up on your followers’ Twitter pages.

OK, I set up an account and am now connected to a few people. How will this help me get more clients?

The best way to market your practice on social networking sites is to be helpful to others. Post links to news stories and articles (or write your own.) Join a couple of groups on LinkedIn or Facebook and interact with other members. Answer questions that others have posted. Include links to your blog or website.

The more you do these things, the more you will be recognized as an expert in your field. When people find your information helpful they will pass it on to their social networks. Your Internet presence will grow, which will give you more credibility in your local market.

How much time does all this take?

At the beginning, expect to spend a few hours setting up your social networking account and reading the help files. From there, it’s simply a matter of reading other people’s posts and adding your own content. Plan for a minimum of 30 minutes, once or twice a week.

It’s very important to post new content frequently. Each time you post, you are reminding those in your network that you’re out there. Frequent postings increase the chances that you will be contacted by someone who is actively looking for help.

What about privacy and confidentiality?

To protect your personal information, check the privacy settings in your social networking account. But keep in mind that anything you post is potentially public. Even if you delete it from your account, it could be in someone else’s account, or in an archive somewhere. Therefore, assume that whatever you post will stay there forever.

Where can I learn more about social networking?

Linkedin, Facebook and Twitter all have extensive libraries of Help files. There are also free third-party tutorials, as well as applications that automate certain tasks. You can find these through a Google search. For example:

free facebook tutorial

free twitter tutorial

twitter tools

If you want to avoid commercial websites that try to sell you programs, limit your search to .org or .edu sites. Simply add site:org or site:edu (no spaces) to your search terms. e.g., *free facebook tutorial site:org*

A final word of advice...

Don't do too much research. You don't need to know everything about social networking before getting started. You're smart – you'll learn as you go along.

References:

www.linkedin.com

www.facebook.com

www.twitter.com

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