



An Editor Gets Hooked On LinkedIn

Words of advice for those perplexed by the latest in online networking

Yesterday

You've probably at least heard of LinkedIn. Or more likely, you've received a random e-mail from someone you met years ago at a company Christmas party that says "Hey, will you join my LinkedIn Network?" At that point, you made one of two choices: you promptly deleted the e-mail as SPAM, or you were brave and clicked, Yes.

If you clicked yes, you probably set up a LinkedIn account. That was six months ago. Since then you've done nothing.

You're not alone.

I used to be like you, too. I signed up for an account not understanding the purpose of the site. And as I tried to broaden my network of connections through the site, I've received numerous e-mails from people saying they don't have the first clue what it's about. So, I've decided to write this article to share the little knowledge I've gathered to help you plunge head first into the world of online networking.

Initiation

First we should review the basics. What is LinkedIn? It's an online social networking site. At its core, the site is a way for you to have a "virtual office," where people can go to find out about you and your company. You control what information people can access and you control who gets to see that information. It's like a fully interactive advertisement in the phone book that you can update as often – or as infrequently – as you like. You've heard of MySpace and Facebook. LinkedIn is a stripped down version designed for grown-ups to help them do business.

Not so scary, right?

The goal of the site is to get connections. When someone agrees to be a connection, you broaden your web of contacts, which then allows you to access to more and more people. It's like the game of six degrees of Kevin Bacon, but online and without Kevin Bacon (I checked and he isn't registered).

Now, I'm certainly not a LinkedIn pro, but I am having fun with it. I've found

myself spending countless hours in the last week updating my profile and searching the LinkedIn network to find who I know. Another neat feature that has led me down the path of wasted hours is an advanced search function that allows you to filter the network by company. That's an easy way to find people you've done business with. Once you find someone, you can send him or her an invitation to be in your network. And by the way – the more connections you have, the easier it becomes to send out invitations.

Get Inquisitive

Another cool feature on LinkedIn is the ability to ask a question. I used this feature to do research for this story. I asked everyone in my network how they use LinkedIn.

The general response I received was that people had signed up, thought the service was interesting, but that's it.

A handful of diehard LinkedIn users wrote me with their recommendations. Eric Guerin, who produces online movies through his company SmartMarket Movie in Whitinsville, said that LinkedIn users need to regularly update their status. That means letting people know that you're in the office, on vacation, working on a new project, whatever.

"Every time you update your status this appears on all of your connections pages as a network update. This keeps you visible to all your connections on a regular basis," he wrote. The same holds true for every time you post a new photo or make any type of update to your profile.

John DiPietro, a local speaker and communications consultant based in Holden, has amassed a network of 440 connections. He wrote me to tell me that he's started using LinkedIn's question function like Google. He just sends out mass e-mails asking for advice and has scored big, like when he asked about discount cruises and found a deal through the help of his network that saved him \$500.

Making Friends

One of the biggest hurdles to get over once you've set up a LinkedIn account is to build your contacts. But I took a relatively simple step that boosted my connections – and my obsession with the site. That step was to simply upload my contacts from Microsoft Outlook onto my LinkedIn portfolio. With a few clicks of the mouse, LinkedIn was able to send out notices to all the people in my contacts with active profiles and ask them to join my network. I went from a relative LinkedIn loser with about 15 connections to a LinkedIn star with a connection count now at 85 and climbing.

So, is LinkedIn going to make you or your business more successful? Maybe, maybe not. Like traditional networking, you get what you give with LinkedIn. But if you do decide to venture deeper into the web of online social networking, be sure to look me up and send me an invitation to connect.