



Professionals Latch Onto LinkedIn

By Hengel, Mark

ONCE A MONTH, NATALIE Ghidotti must organize a meeting for the Arkansas chapter of the Public Relations Society of America.

For May, the speaker was Will Robinson, whom Ghidotti found while reading a Washingtonian Magazine story in which Robinson, an expert in new media and its uses in political campaigns, was quoted.

"I just e-mailed him through LinkedIn," said Ghidotti, owner of Ghidotti Communications of Little Rock and president-elect of the PRSA chapter. "I wrote, 'I looked you up on LinkedIn because I read your quote in the Washingtonian Magazine; I'm not a stalker.'"

The initial contact took place around Christmas, Ghidotti said, and led to Robinson's presentation last month. Without LinkedIn, Robinson probably never would have spoken to the group, Ghidotti said.

LinkedIn is a social networking site designed for business professionals that has seen rapid growth in the recent year. Like the better known MySpace and Facebook, the site, www.linkedin.com, allows users to create personal profiles listing work experience, contact information and - most important - the ability to network with other users on the site.

Social networking sites might be considered a place to play for youngsters, with MySpace and Facebook users personalizing their profiles in goofy ways. However, the young at heart view the blander LinkedIn as a no-nonsense tool for creating connections that will be useful for business, and professionals are quickly learning its uses.

"All the people I know professionally probably have LinkedIn profiles now," Ghidotti, 33, said.

Chip Paris of Williams/Crawford & Associates of Fort Smith compared LinkedIn's use to the networking that takes place at cocktail parties.

"Typically, you know someone and they introduce you to someone else. And by the end of the night, you know two or three more people you wouldn't have known," said Paris, who has made more than 100 connections using LinkedIn.

LinkedIn employs a similar tactic for creating connections on its Web site. Users are provided a set number of e-mails they may send to anyone with a profile on the site. However, most connections are made through the use of a mutual acquaintance.

To make a connection with someone outside of a network, a user must ask a mutual friend to introduce him or her. Martin Thoma, principal at Thoma Thoma of Little Rock, an advertising agency, said LinkedIn's insistence on building connections through references lends legitimacy to the site.

"The power of it is that through one or two connections, you might be able to make a connection with a possible business partner," said Thoma, who has 60 connections. "You can mine their network for people you might benefit from knowing."

Thoma said he has not created any business opportunities since joining LinkedIn a couple years back. However, he has noticed a sharp increase in the number of e-mails he receives asking him to join.

LinkedIn now claims more than 20 million profiles, and Compete.com, which provides Web site analytics, shows that the site's number of unique monthly visitors has almost quintupled during the past year. LinkedIn had nearly 4.5 million unique monthly visitors in April, compared with fewer than 1 million a year earlier.

Thoma said he most often receives the invitations from people he already knows. However, linking with current acquaintances allows him to strengthen his offline relationships.

"It's really about leveraging real-life relationships; it's not just about creating online relationships," Thoma said.

Face to Face

Paris also said he does not think LinkedIn will supplant face-to-face meetings as the most effective method for solidifying a business relationship.

"Success depends on me being able to talk to people," Paris said. "This gives me one more way to get in front of a client."

What the site offers is a place to network with other professionals who might be able to assist him. Plus, it offers the equivalent of an online Rolodex, listing a directory of connections alphabetically.

Consider it more of a referral network on steroids, though.

"It's not a sales vehicle, but I have had a great referral network," said I. Barry Goldberg, managing director of Entelechy Partners of Little Rock and a regular columnist for Arkansas Business.

Goldberg has been a member of LinkedIn for more than 10 years, saying that he joined the network while he was living in the San Francisco area and LinkedIn was still in the test phase.

Since that time, Goldberg, who lists more than 300 connections, said he has used the site to supplement his relationships. He said the site has helped him with business development in the cities he travels to most often. He also said the site's ability to list references and work history helps him weed out business partners.

"Like every other network - everyone is trying to get into another person's pockets," Goldberg said. "At its best, you get people who are honest. ... At its worst, you find a lot of creative ways to say unemployed."

Goldberg said he used the site to eliminate a prospective business partner from consideration. The man was seeking to partner with Goldberg on a project, and Goldberg said he used the man's work history to research whether he would make a good partner. After speaking with several of the man's former business partners, Goldberg came to the conclusion that he might not be a good bet.

Goldberg introduced Martin Thoma to the site, Thoma said. One strategy Goldberg employs that Thoma said can help many other LinkedIn users is answering questions posted by LinkedIn users on the message boards.

Goldberg has answered 30 questions on LinkedIn, according to the site, and the answers he has posted have resulted in his being listed as an expert in 12 areas. Thoma said he believes answering questions on the site could result in many people seeking a LinkedIn user as an expert.

Goldberg said he does not post to gain clients, but rather to keep himself sharp.

"Nothing helps one work out their own distinctions or questions better than answering questions for themselves," Goldberg said.

Amy Glover Bryant, president of Glover Bryant Communications of Little Rock, said the question-and-answer function is one of the reasons she frequents LinkedIn.

"I utilize it to answer questions," she said, saying she sticks to topics in the public relations or social networking categories. "I can go on and answer questions and tag them with my Web site so people can contact me directly."

Bryant, who has more than 180 connections, also said keeping up with social networking trends such as LinkedIn is vital in her profession.

"This is where public relations and marketing is going, so as a PR and marketing specialist, it's my job to keep up," she said.

While **LinkedIn might represent a part of the future**, Goldberg said the site is still just one more networking tool.

"At its best, it works well because you only get references through a chain of people who you know," he said. "Anyone in my network, I know who they are and can recommend them."

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