



Q: What the heck is LinkedIn for?

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Question: I have gotten several invitations from LinkedIn and I have even signed up for an account, but what exactly did I sign up for? How do I use it to help me in my business? - Steve

Answer: Social networking as a means for growing your business is an approach every business should strongly consider. The wild popularity of sites like MySpace and Facebook has paved the way for business professionals to interact like they would in traditional business networking groups, only at the speed of light.

Not only can you get in front of prospects for your products and services, you can explore new business development ideas, get advice from other business owners without ever leaving your desk (take advantage of the "wisdom of the crowd").

Any idea you have for expanding your business, you can post as a question on sites like LinkedIn.com (which I recommend as the starting point for anyone new to business social networking) and get the equivalent of a market research analysis or direct contacts into new industries.

The first thing to understand when venturing into social networking as a business is that it's time intensive. In the early stage it would not be unusual to spend a half hour to an hour per session for the first couple of days getting up to speed and connecting with others. And to truly take advantage of the networking opportunities, you must be willing to engage on a regular basis (in my case, daily but only a few minutes at a time).

If you can't commit to working with your profile every couple of days (or weekdays at least), you're likely not going to get through the learning curve and will get very little out of the experience. You can not successfully interact in a social network on a casual or infrequent basis. The key to getting something out of LinkedIn is asking and answering questions.

Imagine being a member of a business networking group, but not attending any of the meetings, engaging in any of the discussions or getting involved in any of the events. You would likely view the membership's value in a completely different way than those that do engage.

Social networking is simply an online extension of how we interact in off-line social events. At a cocktail party, if you find yourself in the corner and not engaging with anyone, by the end of the night you will likely feel like it was a waste of time.

When you do socially engage at a cocktail party, as a result of getting to know someone, you often find common business interests, a resource for a business problem that you are experiencing or even an opportunity to do business, but it doesn't happen in the first 5 minutes.

Larger businesses that are looking to attract Gen X / Gen Y employees would benefit greatly from a structured engagement in the social networking world and may even want to commit resources to ensure that it is being done on a regular basis (IBM actually has a VP of Social Networking).

But, before you get started down this road, be honest with yourself about how much time you are willing to devote to immersing yourself into the Social Networking world. You can't be social if you're not ever there...

Bonus Tips: Those that have teenagers can leverage their child's familiarity with social networking to (a) more quickly get up to speed on the do's and don'ts and (b) use it to further embellish the relationship with their child (hey, mom and dad ain't so clueless after all!)

When asking questions on LinkedIn, use headlines that are easy to digest and post your question at the end of the day (when most of the users are spending time answering questions). The first question I ever posted was too complicated and was posted in the middle of the day...it got no responses.

The next day I posted the same question in a more appealing headline (just looking through the questions that get the most responses will help you craft your questions) and got immediate responses that were very helpful and a lot of them!

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