

Social Search at LinkedIn Beats Google

Written by [Bernard Lunn](#) / May 21, 2008 11:15 AM / [4 Comments](#)



I just found a more useful way to search than Google. (Sort of.) It only works for a defined use case, but, in a search market that is 85% going on 90% Google-dominated, this can still be significant. The site that provides a better search experience than Google? [Business social network LinkedIn](#). Long time readers of this blog know that I have already chronicled my success at using LinkedIn for both [business development](#) and [recruiting](#). So it is not a surprise to me that LinkedIn is seeing easily the highest growth rate among social networking sites.

[LinkedIn's 361% year-over-year growth](#) handily beats Facebook's 56% growth in the same period, according to the latest stats from Nielsen:

Table 1: Top 10 Social Networking Sites for April 2008 (U.S., Home and Work)

Site	Apr-08 UA (000)	Apr-07 UA (000)	YOY Growth
Myspace.com	58,754	57,003	3%
Facebook	22,482	14,403	56%
Classmates Online	14,514	12,913	12%
LinkedIn	8,695	1,886	361%
Windows Live Spaces	7,869	8,349	-6%
AOL Hometown	6,362	8,497	-25%
Reunion.com	6,041	5,020	20%
Club Penguin	3,806	4,073	-7%
Buzznet.com	3,229	1,585	104%
Imeem	2,856	1,491	92%

Source: Nielsen Online

However many people have pointed out to me that my case is unusual. I have been in business for 30 years and have worked across many markets, in many countries and I have worked the LinkedIn system to get those contacts usable. This puts me in the early adopter end for people of my age, which means that more people like me are likely to use LinkedIn more aggressively in the future. That fits the original mission of LinkedIn, which is to enable people to rebuild their relationship networks built up over years in business. That has been totally successful in my case. I have re-connected with people that I worked with over 20 years ago who are now senior people in specialist areas and I have found those connections valuable in my work.

When LinkedIn Won't Work

However, LinkedIn is less useful to somebody without a deep network. For example, somebody just entering the workforce. Somebody who has probably had a great time at college using Facebook and finds the features on LinkedIn to be relatively primitive and well, kind of boring. And not that useful either, because while they can see who the right contacts are they are no more reachable than they are in ZoomInfo or any other public directory. Just because I have the name, address and email for [Michael Moritz at Sequoia Capital](#) does not mean that he will return my email/call. And having a way to spam him via InMail does not really help. Actually Michael Moritz and I attended the same college at the same time and he still won't return my email via LinkedIn. Probably, he knows that we did not actually meet at college and I probably want to pitch him on an investment. (Really, Mr. Moritz, I don't have a pitch for you... well not now at any rate.)

So even if I pay to upgrade to LinkedIn Business for \$20 per month for the privilege of spamming (sorry, sending InMail) 3 people I don't know every month, it won't be much more useful than renting a list from a good old-fashioned arms dealer to the spam industry (aka the list rental industry, sometimes called Database Marketing). I have not upgraded and don't intend to on those terms. Herein lies a possible flaw in LinkedIn's business model - the people who will pay are the people without networks who need to sell to those who have networks, which may end up disappointing both parties.

Getting Results Without a Network

Which is why my recent use of LinkedIn was so significant. **It did not require my existing network to get results.** I used the [Questions & Answers](#) feature to get answers to two real world questions. Both involved finding a specialist type of service provider that I needed in a hurry. I got the answer and I have hooked up with enough specialist vendors to get the job completed. Those vendors are now in my network. Done.

Before using LinkedIn, I tried Google. This eventually got me to some sites that maintained directories of these vendors, but it was still a lengthy process from there to get to a short-list. In one case my Google search got me to [Yelp](#), where there was a rating for one of those vendors, but there was only 1 vendor in that category, so the rating wasn't useful.

Using LinkedIn, within 24 hours, I got recommendations on more than one vendor that were precise and ended up being very useful in finding a good fit.

The next day, by accident, I discovered a problem, though I think this problem is fixable by LinkedIn. The day after doing this search, I was talking to a friend about an entirely unrelated matter. He asked me if I had found that vendor that I was looking for. He was just making conversation, but I was concerned. "Did you get an email from me on this?" I asked him. It turns out that Questions send InMails (emails within LinkedIn) to all my contacts. I had no intention of spamming all my contacts to help with my fairly simple search. Sorry. Really. The form on LinkedIn specifically asks me if I want to restrict the Question to my contacts. I did not. I assumed that I needed to trawl wider than that. However I assumed (incorrectly it seems) that my contacts would not be sent InMails.

That is easily fixable by LinkedIn. They will have to fix this or risk really turning off their core community and fall into the, "oh, no, another annoying spammy tool" category. I am confident that LinkedIn is alert to this danger and will fix it.

What I assumed happens is that people with expertise in the area that I was interested in register on the site as willing to look at Questions relating to my area of interest. I am fully aware that this is self-selecting and will get me people with a commercial motivation to provide an Answer. That's OK, I was not born yesterday, don't believe in Santa Claus and don't believe everything I read online or in print. Questioning every source is an ingrained and essential habit for most people. It still got me a useful short-list quicker than any other source. I did not need to perform lengthy searches on Google for a specialist directory or forum.

Conclusion

LinkedIn clearly needs to develop this feature more. Apart from preventing the spamming of my contacts, I expect them to refine the selection of experts. This is already self-selecting. When you send a Question, you select from categories and sub categories from a taxonomy that is quite intuitive for business people. I selected Hiring and Human Resources and then from that I selected Staffing and Recruiting. That means my Question only went to people who claim expertise in Staffing and Recruiting, which is like an uber-forum capability. I don't need to find a forum to find an expert, I just send a Question and the expert finds me. I can envisage LinkedIn refining the taxonomy further to get more fine-grained areas of expertise as the network grows. They will have to remain alert to commercial manipulation as vendors get more savvy about using this, but there are now fairly well established ways to do that and LinkedIn is a controlled environment, so they can lock out an offender. The Internet, on the other hand, cannot lock somebody from sending emails, despite valiant efforts by the spam cops, and LinkedIn seem quite vigilant to this danger.

I am not sure if this works as well in Facebook. In LinkedIn, business people work to a defined taxonomy that is well accepted. In Facebook it is way more free-form and that is probably a lot more fun. But if Web 3.0, aka the Semantic Web, is "the combination of mass collaboration and structured databases" (my definition) then I may have just seen the early signs of Web 3.0 in action. And it helped me to Get The Job Done.

