

Tech Culture: Linked Way In

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By Joe Procopio



My name is Joe Procopio, and I'm hooked on LinkedIn.

For me, that's a big statement. As a long time purveyor of finding the usefulness of social networking principles in the squishiness of technology (see intrepidmedia.com, the community that did community before community was cool – and by “cool” I mean “a vast wasteland of pseudo-personal noise and shady marketing shenanigans”), I find the recent social networking phenomenon to be a big pain in my technical butt. MySpace is the Wal-Mart to my mom-and-pop shop, and Facebook is the Target – same principles, just as evil, cleaner store.

And just as I drop by Wal-Mart every couple of months when it winds up having the lowest price on the gadget I need, I have a MySpace page and I have a Facebook page. Don't ask me the URL, I long ago forgot the why or the what for, but they're there, and every once in a while I get spam informing me that some hot 18-year-old wants desperately to be my friend. I can automatically discern that “she” didn't do her research because these emails invariably start out “Dear Intrepid,” (last name, “Media”). I also get a lot of junk snail mail for “Intrepid Medical.” It's the same principle, only from a stupider address compiler.

About a year ago, I reopened LinkedIn. I already had an account – that's just something I do, when I hear about the next big thing on the Internets, I sign up like the rest of the sheep and wait for the cash and notoriety to start rolling in, then I forget about it for... ever until the company either goes out of business or Google buys it, in which case I can ignore it along with all the rest of my Google junk.

Anyway, about a year ago I wound up Linking In, purely by accident, with someone I used to work with ages ago. And once I made the connection I found I was able to catch up, in a career sense, with everything the guy had done over the last ten years since I split said company for greener pastures. I reveled in his highs and empathized with his lows. I rode the roller-coaster of emotions as his title changed from Manager to Director to Webmagician to Code Monkey Wrangler and then a nine-month dark period and then back to Manager and then Director. I also found out he's big into his church, has two kids, and, thanks to a thousand words from an obvious mobile phone self-portrait, has lost about 20 pounds. I did all of this without, you know, having to talk to the guy.

I found this fascinating.

So I started accepting connections, I put up a little blurb about my consulting firm, and once more, I waited, with completely unbaited breath, for the gears to start turning.

Only this time, they did.

Within a few days I had a few dozen invitations to connect – ranging from people I was working with at that exact moment to people I hadn't seen in several years to people from the actual Intrepid Medical, who I'm pretty sure were just fishing for some material to use in a cease-and-desist, but I've got the trademark now so they can suck it..

Know the legal system, people, it just makes sense.

Once I had a steady stream of connections happening, I decided to get in and tweak. I put what amounts to a resume up in my profile. I opened up my Outlook address book and started making connections with, curiously enough, people with whom I already had connections. I started creating personal LinkedIn policies – like my distinct lack of photo. I have an “it'll do” type headshot for my writing, but there's a gap between snarky techy punk and the type of profile that you find on LinkedIn. To put it bluntly, you wouldn't want to connect with the guy in my headshot. You may want to buy him a drink, however, and that's perfectly acceptable.

I also decided pretty early on not to request or give out LinkedIn recommendations. Part of this is because I can't be bothered, but it's mostly because I think there's a saturation point there. The connections, in my mind, can be flimsy at times because they're totally driven by individual guidelines. For instance, if I'm connected to Johnny Rockstar, it may be a perfectly useful connection to an important person and one that my connections might also find useful, or it may be that I figured out his email address and he has a loose connection policy. As an unabashed name-dropper, I have no quarrel with this. But when it comes to the vouch, the seal of approval, the big thumbs up, I think it's too critical to mess with. If dude needs a recommendation and calls me and asks me for one, and most importantly, deserves one, I'm all over it. I will put words to paper that will make the reader question their own talent and intellect.

But in the lazy world of social networking, I think the potential for abuse and the lack of oversight devalues the recommendation itself. Now, mind you, I may change this policy at any minute, especially if I find one day I desperately need a recommendation in the LinkedIn universe. But until then, I'm more of a “Yes, I've got ten minutes and would

love to talk about my experience working with Johnny Rockstar” kind of guy.

This brings me to my point. Like any social network, be it online, local and physical, or your little black book, a LinkedIn network is exactly as valuable as the care one puts into creating it and the amount of maintenance done thereafter, minus the amount of abuse one heaps upon it. Did that make any sense at all? I’m sorry. Here’s what I meant:

When creating your network, it’s important to draw a distinction between who you know and who you know of. Far be it from me to tell you how to decide this, and I’m also aware that certain positions – sales, marketing, public relations – require a huge network where the nodes get pinged rarely. However, what most people don’t realize is that creating a huge network with barely definable relationships is akin to rewriting a phone book.

Maintaining your LinkedIn Network, or any online network, is exactly like maintaining relationships in your real life, only a lot... less. You don’t have to notice every time one of your connections gets a new haircut (although, you know, it would be nice... Bob), you don’t have to take your new connections out to a welcome lunch – that would be costly and immensely creepy, but one of the places LinkedIn succeeds is profile changes. You get a new job or a promotion, you update your profile, LinkedIn lets everyone know, either with an email or in handy digest form. This makes it very simple to keep up with your peeps, and congratulate them (or in some cases, warn them to leave the building through the back door and never look back) when they have a career changing moment.

Last, but certainly not least, let’s talk about abuse, as in don’t. This should go without saying, but abuse can be subtle, even though the intent rarely is. For example, is it abuse if you only blast your network when you need something? Not really. When you think about it, this is the way networks work – you need something, people pitch in, they need something, you pitch in. Is it abuse when you plop your email address into your first name/last name in the hopes of garnering even more connections? Not in certain circumstances. As I said, some positions require populous networks and some people just like a big party with lots of talking circles. Is it abuse when you advertise the amount of connections you have within your first name/last name? Well, yeah, it pretty much is.

And abuse may seem like a victimless crime – after all, you’re only abusing your own network, which you created, you are the center of, and you can do with whatever you please. But every time you abuse your own network, it devalues each of your connections a little bit, and the connections of your connections a little bit less. And their connections. And so on and so on until, much like some of those other networking sites who shall remain nameless (in this paragraph anyway), the value of all the connections is reduced to zero.

And then the company either goes out of business or Yahoo! buys it.