

The ABCs of online networking

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NEW YORK (MarketWatch) – More and more people are turning to professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, to reach out to customers, exchange ideas with colleagues and form impressions of potential hires.

When used correctly, online networking can enhance professional relationships and broaden business horizons. But if you're not careful, these sites can also leave co-workers and customers with a negative impression of you.

If you regularly network with clients and colleagues online, make sure you're portraying yourself in a positive light by heeding these five suggestions from Mikolaj Jan Piskorski, assistant professor at Harvard Business School:

1. **Keep your profile updated.** Whether you're interviewing for a job or scheduling a face-to-face meeting with a new client, it's important to update your publicly accessible online profiles. Business associates may form the wrong impression if your work experience isn't current or you haven't uploaded a new picture of yourself since college. Hint: Never post snapshots of that trip to Vegas unless you're sure they're locked away from prying eyes.
2. **Maintain ties with people at all levels.** Some people make the mistake of padding their online contact list with names guaranteed to impress, but don't neglect the people you actually work with day-to-day. "If I'm the VP of sales and I'm not connected to anyone in the sales department online that sends a horrendously bad message," says Piskorski. Your online presence should reflect your ability to connect with the people you encounter in real life as well.
3. **Watch the number of connections.** If you have too many online contacts, people may wonder whether you have time to get any work done. On the opposite end of the spectrum, having too few may send the message that you're antisocial or difficult to get along with. "Numbers in excess of 300 are beginning to look suspicious, depending on your industry," cautions Piskorski, "But you should also be wary of letting your connections drop below 100."
4. **Stay in contact with old colleagues.** It's easy to lose track of them when you move on to a new firm, but make the effort to reach out to past associates online. If your contact list doesn't include any links with people from your last job, those browsing your profile may assume you left on bad terms or failed to forge connections.
5. **Get (and give) endorsements.** You may think that requesting online endorsements is boastful or just plain cheesy, but it's in your best interest to have a few. Many recruiters now provide hiring managers with a potential employee's recommendations from LinkedIn and other professional networking sites, according to Piskorski. If you don't have anyone singing your praises, it may jeopardize your chances of landing the job. Hint: It's always a good idea to reciprocate after getting a nice endorsement.

