

Social Networking Will Go Mainstream

And When It Does, Expect Business as Usual

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To the Millennials reading this, here's something you might want to save as a time capsule or something. I entered the workforce in January of 1995. My first job was as a graphic designer for Columbia House -- the 10-CDs-for-99-cents people (that's right, before CDs became drink coasters, you could order them through snail mail).

More important, I was the "tech savvy" one because I had a personal e-mail account via AOL and a dial-up modem before my new employer had even adopted e-mail at all. Can you believe that? I would leave the office after a full day only to come home and have no work e-mail to contend with. I only had personal e-mail and the occasional chat-room exchange. Personal e-mail and chat rooms were fun for me back then. Kind of like social networking now.

Obviously a lot has changed. But some things haven't. E-mail has of course gone mainstream. Many of us have become dependent upon it to do business. Spam has become an annoyance that most of us fight against, but ultimately deal with because the e-mail platform is such a staple to our professional -- and personal -- lives. We get spammed by brands, by friends and, of course, by business scams. And as I think back to my early experiences with e-mail, prior to my first employer adopting it, I actually see a few similarities in my experience using multiple social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

I like to think of my multiple networks as my "social system" ([see diagram](#)). The ones that add long-term value are the ones I maintain. [LinkedIn has become my Rolodex](#); Twitter has nearly replaced instant messenger. But, increasingly, each of my social applications is beginning to show signs of "spamming" behavior -- not unlike what most of us have been dealing with for years via e-mail. On Facebook my friends spam me. I get messages promoting their recent accomplishments. Brands spam me, too. I get invited to all sorts of events that I never asked to be invited to. Non-friends spam me with all sorts of propositions or requests to be friends. On Twitter, similar things happen. I log on, check out my "direct messages," and while most of them are friend or contacts who want to communicate, many of them are pitches. Same goes for conversation on Twitter, where individuals, businesses or even politicians are clamoring to get your attention. Same goes for LinkedIn, where I regularly get updates from people as they change careers.

None of this is inherently bad -- this isn't a gripe or a cry for help. It's simply an observation that not unlike e-mail, many of the social applications we use are [becoming so convenient](#), so utilitarian that they begin to attract activity that we need to learn to filter out. Just ask any metrics analyst, they'll show you the stats of how effective well-designed e-mail initiatives can be. But there's a catch. Most effective e-mails are opted into by users who have decided to hear more from brands (or individuals) they trust. Violate that trust, and you are in the spam business.

As social [networks become mainstream, it will be business as usual](#). We'll log onto our network of choice, just as we log onto e-mail and sift through the spam. And we'll be making up our minds about brands and people along the way. Those who spam us will become a nuisance, something to tolerate.

And those who make it worth our time will be rewarded with our trust and maybe even loyalty. As marketers and individuals, the choice to add value or generate more noise is ours to make.