

Marketing Minute ~ Human Networking

So, let's have a conversation about that social networking thing. There are two areas I would like to have a heart to heart on. One is what you should NEVER do. And the other is how can you use it in business to retain and acquire customers.

I'm sure you have heard about it. I'm sure you have been 'invited in' by either friends or business acquaintances who are looking to strengthen their list of 'friends. You might even be doing it. But, are you doing it right?

Let's take a quick look at the most popular social media networking (or 'human' networking) sites out there.

1. Twitter: www.twitter.com—This has become a favorite because of its ease of use. It's great for making connections you wouldn't otherwise be able to make, and for quick sharing of information.
2. LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com—Offers a great search function and a way to connect with others in a group, ask questions and learn more about someone professionally.
3. Facebook: www.facebook.com—The #1 social network in terms of users, surpassing MySpace in April, 2008. For that reason alone, you should at least check it out. Businesses have become listed on Facebook with their pages, and you can become a 'fan' or a 'member', depending on their angle.
4. Ning network: www.ning.com—There are thousands of Ning networks out there, and chances are you've visited them without even knowing it, because many networks have paid to use their own domain name instead of including 'ning' at the end. These networks allow you to connect for free or as members on a specific subject or with a specific group of people with similar interests.
5. Blogs—yours or others. You can showcase your expertise through your own posts or at others' blogs. This is a good tool for PR, especially crisis control and management, but requires a great deal of time investment.

You see, social networking can be a lot of things. It can be a waste of time or a huge marketing tool. (I'm referring to people using social networking primarily for business.) Whether it's a waste of time or getting you new business depends on how you're using it. And one of the ways to make sure you're using it as a marketing tool is to post effective, results-oriented social networking profiles.

So, how do you do that? Let's start with that first subject: three things you should NEVER do.

1. Not sharing enough personal details. Remember, social networking is about connecting with people. The way we connect as humans is by sharing things about ourselves. Therefore, make sure you add a few details about your life, your hobbies, your preferences, etc. Do you have kids? Dogs? Like to travel? Read? Whatever it is, make sure you put it on your profile.

On that note, you should also make sure your personality comes through. Don't just list a dry and boring nuts-and-bolts description that would be better suited on a resume. Get your personality in there—let people know who you are and if you're someone they'd like to get to know better.

2. Sharing too many personal details. There was a King of the Hill episode where one of the main character's friends (I don't generally watch this show, so don't know any of their names) put up a MySpace profile. He said, "I share things on my MySpace page I wouldn't tell my closest friend." Then, he realized what he said, and added "Don't go looking for me on MySpace."

The moral of this story is if you wouldn't be comfortable sharing this at a networking event, then you probably shouldn't be sharing it on your social networking profile. I know, I say too little, then I say too much. Here's a good rule of thumb—imagine having a conversation with a client. What types of details about your life would you feel comfortable telling your client? Those are good ones to share on your profile. What types of things would you NOT want your client to know about? Leave those off.

3. Selling too much. Again, picture yourself at a networking event. Someone rushes in, thrusts their business card into your hands, maybe a brochure and a sales letter as well, and rushes to the next person. Feel like hiring them or working with them?

Well, selling too much on your profile or in your social networking activities is much the same thing. Remember, the idea behind social networking is building relationships. You build the relationships, the business will come.

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Now that doesn't mean you can't sell at all, but building relationships and connections should come first. Selling should come second. And when you do sell, make sure you keep the relationship-building up.

By all means talk about your business and describe what you do, but do it in a fun, non-threatening, non-hype-y way that shows your personality. And don't forget to sprinkle in a few personal details so your friends and followers can get to know you as a person.

Let's call it one of the Human e-Networking tools.

Traditional outbound marketing is less interesting and less effective to people today. Because of the Internet, people can educate themselves and engage other users, other potential customers and other industry experts and become empowered customers. Many businesses today are using Internet tools to build those business relationships with existing and potential customers. One of the 'human networking' tools, blogging, can increase the interactivity you can have with other customers and with the company you do business with.

Some companies have even gone a bit further and put up different content depending on where their visitors come from. This personalization can bring great results. The visitor will look at more pages more frequently than they have before. One such company is Cisco Systems, an advanced technology company whose hardware, software and service offerings are used to create the Internet solutions that make networks possible, providing easy access to information.

Web 2.0 is a key theme in Cisco's The Human Network Effect campaign launched in September. Designed to enlarge the Cisco brand, the campaign is the second phase of Cisco's Welcome to the Human Network brand campaign, which launched two years ago. The company previously was perceived as the networking company, the big company that sells routers and switches to other big companies that go into a closet that no one ever sees. They are now in the consumer business as well as the meeting center business. The acquired Linksys in 2003, which targets its network hardware products to consumers and small business owners. And last year, Cisco acquired WebEx, a provider of on-demand collaboration, online meeting, Web conferencing and video conferencing applications.

As a part of their human network campaign, they tell human stories, business stories, social stories and personal stories using the basis of the underlying network. The new campaign, designed to focus on breaking down barriers and collaboration, also has a digital focus such as blogs, RSS feeds, webisodes, podcasts and video-on-demand technology integrated on a new Human Network Effect area on Cisco.com.

The company has a firm grip on blogging. They have staffers who regularly read particular influential blogs and communicate using them. This participation with expressing opinions and interacting with influential people, allows them to pull traffic from other blogs into their blog to support launches of Cisco products. The company also has online collaboration that has joined social networking as an important part of their marketing culture. Rather than asking employees to change their behavior, it shows how effective it can be for marketers to listen to customers and business partners, to enable them in innovative ways they may have not thought of.

So, keep a watch for change. It is on the horizon and closer than you think. Begin making use of human networking online services to watch and monitor your customers, your competitors and others you do business with. And participate in them, making them work for you and your business. Just don't share your secrets.

