

A black and white photograph of a long, straight road stretching into the distance under a cloudy sky. The road is flanked by fields and trees, and the sky is filled with soft, diffused light.

Online social networks can help career, if used wisely

By Naras Eechambadi

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THE SITUATION FOR "THE ANALYZER"

• Many "social" networks are morphing into powerful professional networks • Your customers are increasingly relying on these as sources of trusted information • You have to be smart about how you leverage this tool for cultivation and sales

Online social networks such as Facebook and MySpace have exploded in popularity. What started as forums for high school and college kids to share information, gossip and pictures with friends are morphing into powerful professional networks.

Social e-networks overlap and compete with established professional online networks like LinkedIn and Plaxo Pulse. All these can be effective sales tools, but have to be used subtly.

HOW?

The first use is for contacts with prospects through your current acquaintances, friends or customers. You begin by searching these networks for people who are already your contacts.

Software, from companies such as Visible Path, Spoke and Contact Networks, mines your contact database and the social networks you belong to and generate lists of people you know who are connected to executives at the company you want to sell to. They also rank people as to how likely they are to yield useful introductions. This lets you get the most out of your existing relationships. Just be ready to reciprocate, when asked.

Online networks can help you get smart quickly. Join special interest groups focused on your industry. For example, I belong to three professional groups within Facebook, in addition to a couple of personal groups. It gives me a chance to keep up with trends while contributing to the discussion.



A colleague of mine wanted to learn about customer service issues facing a communications service provider. He posted a question on LinkedIn Answers that resulted in dozens responses within a day. He was then able to engage the head of customer experience at that provider in a very well-informed discussion.

Finally, social networks can help you get to know your customers better as well as bind them to you. If you are in a category that your customers are highly involved in, you may want to consider building your own network. Bodybuilding.com is an online fitness retailer that built its own network, BodySpace, where users can post photos of themselves, describe their workout goals and blog about their progress. Ryan DeLuca, the CEO, credits BodySpace with helping propel the company's revenues from \$65 million in 2006 to \$90 million in 2007, a 38 percent increase.

Common sense and etiquette still apply, perhaps more so in the online world. Don't force your way into discussions, or make a nuisance of yourself. Use these forums to learn, build relationships and credibility. It will pay off when the time comes to close.

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Naras Eechambadi is the CEO of Quaero, a marketing and technology services company that helps companies looking to improve the effectiveness of their marketing efforts and marketing technology investments. He is the author of *High Performance Marketing: Bringing Method to the Madness of Marketing* (Kaplan Professional Press, 2005).

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