

Using The Power of Social Networking in a Recession

By Jack Keogh

I “discovered” Facebook a couple of years ago when I received an invitation to be a “friend” of the teenaged niece of a family connection in Mexico. I accepted the invitation and, to my surprise, some twenty minutes later, I got a message from my daughter – in her early twenties – saying “Dad, get off this site – it’s for kids, not people your age!” At that time, Facebook had a mere 12 million members. My daughter fretted that the site, designed for college students, had been hijacked by teens. I marveled at the connectedness of the younger generations – how did my daughter, at work in New York City, realize so quickly that I had responded to an invitation from Mexico? Then, undeterred, I went ahead and set up my Facebook profile. I figured that one more profile might complement my web “presence” – company website, blog, and profiles on Linked-In and Plaxo. What, if anything, does this mean to you?

In recessionary times it is probably very prudent to stay in touch with as many social and professional contacts as possible. If you want to connect with the people you work with and improve your ability to stay in touch with and expand your “network” of contacts, you might want to consider joining this digital revolution - in the unlikely event that you are not already on board. For starters, I’d like to share a quick and simple method that I use for researching contacts.

Use the search feature on ZoomInfo.com. Suppose that you want to research my name, for instance. Type in “Jack Keogh” and the site delivers a list of “Jack Keoghs” retrieved from the web. You can refine your search to pick the name that most closely matches your contact. In my case, I usually come up in about the second spot on ZoomInfo. When you find me, click on the profile page and then click “view sources” at the top right corner and you will get a good listing of all the information on the web about me. Not perfect – but you find out more than the controlled “public” profile delivered by Plaxo or LinkedIn. In terms of keeping up with your existing networks, do you know how many people can you reach out to?

Facebook, the “new” social networking giant was designed a college student Mark Zuckerberg now 24. It has grown to 175 million users. The MySpace network has 130 million users and is enjoying new growth among the 6.9 million 55 year old plus generation who spend an average of 204 minutes a month on the site. Not to be outdone, Facebook’s greatest growth has come from 35-49 year-olds and it has added twice as many 50-64 year-olds as those under age 18. It is the new leader of the pack, worldwide, with monthly visits by three out of ten Internet users. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, fully one third of adult internet users have a profile on a social networking site – an increase of 25% since 2005.

A new study from Nielsen (http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/nielsen_globalfaces_mar09.pdf) shows that “Social networking and blogging sites are now the 4th most popular activity on the Internet (overcoming personal email) with 67% global reach as to December 2008. That is 5%

more of what they attracted a year ago. While social networks started amongst the younger audience, today's audiences are becoming broader and older. This shift has primarily been driven by Facebook, successfully opened opportunities of social networking to a much wider audience".

The Nielsen Report states that "Social Networking has been the global consumer phenomenon of 2008. Two-thirds of the world's Internet population visit a social network or blogging site and the sector now accounts for almost 10% of all internet time. 'Member Communities' has overtaken personal Email to become the world's fourth most popular online sector after search, portals and PC software applications".

According to Nielsen, "the story is consistent across the world, 'Member Communities' has taken a foothold in every major market from 50% of the online population in Switzerland and Germany to 80% in Brazil. Facebook has become the largest player on the global stage, dominant in many countries, yet localized offerings have won the day in many others. However, the growth in popularity of social networks – and the resultant broadening audience – is only half the story. The staggering increase in the amount of time people are spending on these sites is changing the way people spend their time online and has ramifications for how people behave, share and interact within their normal daily lives".

Although adults share some teen internet habits like connecting with friends, planning events, staying in touch, it seems we now differ from the teenagers by using social networking to meet new friends from across the country and across the world. The sixteen-and-a-half million adults ages 55 and older who are already engaged in social networking have helped AARP's network attract 350,000 users who have already created 1,700 interest groups. Another site, designed for baby Boomers, is Eons.com which has 800,000 users.

In my native Ireland, adults still use the "Pubs" to gather with friends and share group moments. Our bars serve the same purpose. As we grow up and become geographically mobile because of our jobs we are often living further and further away from our family and old friends. Social networking on the internet can help bridge that gap.

Just a few days ago, I got another invitation to be a "friend" on Facebook. This time it was from an elementary-school classmate with whom I had completely lost contact since I was about 12 years old! The upside to social networking is the ability to reconnect with long lost friends and to stay in touch with the many people we meet along the way in our journey through life. In order to minimize the potential downside (sharing too much personal information) before you post, remember that whatever you write can be read by millions of people – most of whom are not your "friends". Your career is as strong as your personal network; and these days, with people spending more and more time at work, your personal life may only be as vital as your professional network. I think it's smart, most especially in a recession, to become fluent with social networks and to discover the power of relationship.