

Background

Social networking sites

Can social networking sites become useful business tools? Until recently that would have seemed unlikely. Sites such as Bebo and Facebook have been regarded as play things, aimed mainly at students and young people. In fact many workplaces have banned their use with bosses complaining that employees are wasting valuable time chatting with friends rather than working. But possibly things are about to change.

Businesses are beginning to see these networking sites as valuable collaboration tools, and the sites themselves are going to have more applications that are specifically aimed at the business user. Already there are sites such as LinkedIn and Ryze that are specifically for the business user.

These sites claim they can help businesses to make valuable business contacts, find high-quality candidates and discover inside connections to help them close deals. Kristof Olsen of *Computers Today* points out that another benefit of networking sites for business is that they allow you to get a feeling about how the market sees your organization. They can help you engage directly with your customers and attract traffic to your web presence. In effect, networking sites can be spider food, attracting the spiders to your web.

So how can companies make the most of networking sites? Industry expert Christine O'Donnell says that those business people who want to utilize the growth of networking sites for their businesses have to follow four simple rules.

The first is that you shouldn't mix business with pleasure. 'Have discrete pages for your business and leisure personas,' advises Christine. Potential clients do not want or need to see photos of your drunken colleagues at the office party. This type of thing would look unprofessional and distract from the business image you are trying to create. First impressions count

as much in the virtual world as in the real world.

Secondly, have a small but lively networking profile. Christine advises businesses to regularly update their pages but not to over-fill them with irrelevant information or applications. Keep it easy to navigate is her advice. 'The real purpose of networking sites for businesses is to capture attention and direct people back to your own websites. Use the networking sites to keep your customers informed of new developments and engage them in conversation; customers like to have an open channel of communication but also constant updates will raise your web presence and will remind other friends of your existence.'

Thirdly, to make sure you are reaching out to the right audience you have to be proactive. It is no good sitting back and hoping that customers will find you. Start or join networks that are relevant to your business. This will help anyone searching for the services you offer to find you through simple searches. By increasing the number of networks you create or join, you increase the chances of being found by potential clients.

The fourth rule is not to be too pushy. As in any walk of life, someone who is too persistent can end up alienating customers and damaging their own reputations. Be subtle with your approach; constantly bombarding your friends with the latest special offer will not win you admirers but informing people that new products have just arrived or a project has been completed will keep interest in your company ticking over.

Possibly the most important piece of advice offered by both Christine and Kristof is to act now. You might think that social networking has no place in the business world but other people do and they are already using them to develop a competitive advantage over you.

Exercises

1 Work with a partner. Discuss the following questions.

- 1 What is a social networking site?
- 2 Have you ever used one?
- 3 Are they popular in your country?
- 4 Can they be used for business?

2 Read the text about social networking sites quickly. Decide which of the following is the best subtitle for the article.

- Social networking sites: Do you know who's watching you?
- Social networking sites: A new way to do business
- Social networking sites: Remember that first impressions count

3 Read the text again and find three advantages of using a networking site for business.

4 Find words or phrases from the text for each definition below. Then try to use each word in a new sentence.

- 1 to officially say something is not allowed (paragraph 1)
- 2 working together to create or produce something (paragraph 2)
- 3 to interest and communicate with someone (paragraph 3)
- 4 to make use of something (paragraph 4)
- 5 made to appear to exist by computer (paragraph 5)
- 6 to make someone interested (paragraph 6)
- 7 to act to stop future problems (paragraph 7)
- 8 to cause someone to become disloyal (paragraph 8)

5 Work with a partner. One of you is Student A and the other is Student B.

Student A: In the text Christine O'Donnell gives advice for companies. Read her advice again and then in your own words, tell your partner what she means by this advice.

- Don't mix business with pleasure.
- Have a small but lively networking profile.

Student B: In the text Christine O'Donnell gives advice for companies. Read her advice again and then in your own words, tell your partner what she means by this advice.

- Be proactive.
- Don't be pushy.

6 Look back at the text and choose three words or phrases that you could use in your day-to-day work.