

Beware of social networking overload

As Web sites proliferate, focus on one or two; don't be like Marcia

 msnbc.com



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updated 9:44 a.m. ET, Mon., July. 21, 2008

There's a great scene from "The Brady Bunch" when Marcia — just turned high school freshman — is nervous about fitting in and making friends so she signs up for every club listed on the school bulletin board.

This is sort of what I see happening with many of you and all the social networking sites out there.

I've been getting questions from readers, colleagues and friends about the social networking explosion in cyberspace. It seems like there's a new site popping up every day, and no one wants to be left out of the latest and greatest group. The choices are endless, everything from Black Planet, a site for African Americans, to Xing.com, a site for professionals with an international flair.

But with all the choices comes a digital daze.

Here's what people have been asking me lately: "Is it enough just to be on LinkedIn and Facebook?" "I just got an invite from a friend who's on Plaxo. What is it and should I join?" "Will I dilute my networking effectiveness if I'm on MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter?"

Marcia! Marcia! Marcia!

You can't be in every club. It's just not humanly possible.

I know, there's a hint of desperation in the air because of the tough economy, and everyone wants to have lots of connections just in case layoffs are looming.

But beware. You might end up with social networking overload.

Enhancing your brand

Trust me. In researching this column, I signed up for as many of the networks out there as I could and what did I get? A headache.

Suddenly my e-mail inbox was flooded with friends accepting my invites for Plaxo, Twitter, etc., and I realized there was no way I was going to have time to do any of these sites justice. Especially since I'm already a member of LinkedIn and Facebook, and I barely have time to keep those up-to-date.

So what's the best strategy?

"There are two purposes to social networks," says Jason Alba, author of "I'm On Facebook, Now What?" and "I'm on LinkedIn, Now What?" "One is for networking, and the other is to enhance your brand."

Neither will happen overnight, he says, so you should take time to figure out your best networking options.

First, you need to be part of at least one of these networks.

Let's face it, these sites have helped many workers with their careers. I hear great stories all the time about people being recommended by their connections and ending up with dream jobs.

Greg Moore was a victim of the mortgage mess and ended up out of a job when the San Diego bank he worked for shuttered. But LinkedIn led him to new employment.

"I had heard about LinkedIn through a guy I met at a golf tournament," he explains. He signed up ASAP, created a profile and started making connections. Next thing he knew, he got an invitation to link up from someone who worked at I Love Rewards, a Toronto-based employee incentive company, who saw his profile and knew the golf buddy.

"Now I'm business development manager for the company," he says.

LinkedIn and Facebook

When it comes to professional networking, most experts say, LinkedIn is probably one site you want on your list.

“LinkedIn has carved out a strong identification within the professional, job-seeking world,” says William Madway, professor of marketing at the Villanova School of Business. “It can offer more contacts and a professional, trustworthy environment for career-related networking. So, if I were attempting to advance myself professionally or career-wise, I’d be very inclined to turn first and foremost to LinkedIn.”

Dan Abelon, the founder of SpeedDate.com, says he uses LinkedIn heavily for hiring. “It is extremely useful for finding appropriate candidates based on skills and work history,” he explains.

If LinkedIn just seems too suit-and-tie for you, Facebook is a good alternative and also on the list for many networking gurus.

I find you can get a good feel for what certain companies are like on this site because managers and employees seem to let their hair down a bit more, offering a glimpse of what the corporate culture may be really like. Where else can you get a cyber feng shui invitation?

Be sure to use Facebook’s privacy settings. This allows users to separate their party photos from the weekend from the professional information they want prospective employers to see, says Adam Ostrow, editor of the social networking news Web site Mashable.com.

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MSNBC July 21st, 2008		
Web site	Who should join?	Membership
MySpace	Everybody	110 million users
Facebook	Everybody	80 million active users
ThomasNet	Engineers	40 million user sessions
LinkedIn	Professionals	23 million users
XING	Professionals	5.7 million users
Sales Spider	Business owners	2 million users per month
Plaxo	Everybody	1 million monthly users
ITtoolbox	IT professionals	700 discussion groups
Jigsaw Data	Professionals	500 companies, 450,000 users
Ryze	Professionals	120,000 users
Fast Pitch!	Professionals	50,000 users

Credit: Outsell, Inc.

The best of the rest

Another site getting a lot of attention these days is Squidoo, a favorite for marketing expert Penny Sansevieri.

She says it’s the best site for career enhancing because “you can upload a video of you, the page is very interactive, you can add widgets, a blog, just about anything.”

It's a useful way to "showcase your knowledge," adds Mashable's Ostrow, because you set up something called a lens on any topic you're interested in, and then create a section that's almost like a personal Web page that includes links and news on the subject.

When a hiring manager Googles your name, your Squidoo page can be a great selling point if your lens includes expertise a company is looking for.

Pulse, a service launched last year by online address book company Plaxo, is another great way to get into the social networking space. It works as an aggregator, with a space on the site where you can see updates on activity on many of your other social networks, Ostrow explains.

It's a good idea to check out all these sites to see what they have to offer, and then it's up to you to choose one or two. You can add more than that if you have time to keep your friends and your profiles up to date, but don't dilute your social networking juice.

It's not going to help your career if you have a bunch of profiles, or pages on a bunch of sites, and no time to check all the connections and news happening everyday. It's better to focus your efforts and building a solid network on one site.

Once you pick one main, general networking site, you might also consider finding a network that targets your profession or industry.

Jon Ruiz, career services advisor at The Art Institute of California in San Francisco, recommends mainstream sites such as LinkedIn and MySpace to design students, but he also points them towards industry sites like Real TV and Coroflot.