

Using LinkedIn for business development: The basics

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There has been a flurry of activity and seminars recently about businesses using social media generally, and LinkedIn specifically to generate new business.

In my experience three of the biggest headaches for marketing people at professional firms are the CRM system, directory entries (at least in law firms) and the website. As LinkedIn and other similar business social media, such as Xing and Plaxo, are a combination of all three they have the potential to eventually become a huge burden!

Clearly social media is a developing phenomenon, but are there genuine opportunities now and how much is hype? Either way, is it an area for the marketing department and, if so, is it a question of using, enabling, promoting, policing and/or controlling?

There is little doubt that LinkedIn has come of age in the UK and elsewhere. LinkedIn recently announced that it has over 36 million members worldwide, with more than nine million members in Europe. It claims to have 1million UK business decision-makers as members. While I am sceptical of this number (unless “what paper clips to order” counts as the entry criteria) it claims 150K UK corporate executives, 400K SME decision-makers and 150K finance professionals. It reports that the average age of its users is 43, 80% have a degree (or higher), an average household income of over Euro85K.

Should I care?

It is easy to be sceptical about social media – corporate blogs were previously hyped and most are pretty stale and uninteresting. They are hardly likely to attract people for a second visit, while Twitter, this year’s winner for the hype award, is still a solution after a problem (in the commercial sense at least – there is no doubt the importance it and other web tools have afforded Iranian protestors and other groups subject to oppression). Should LinkedIn be viewed as anything other than a passing fad? Putting aside any personal benefits to marketing managers from using LinkedIn to

LinkedIn



The number of LinkedIn members listed as present or past employees from a random selection of professional firms:

Accenture - 169,145

KPMG - 106,923

Clifford Chance – 5,085

Freshfields – 3,083

Wragges - 347

Buzzacott – 76

Matthew Arnold & Baldwin
- 62

The number of members in
the PM Forum LinkedIn
group -1,895

Learning the conventions.

Social media sites have their own conventions, and businesses ignore these at their peril. For instance, recently Twitter (the innovative micro blogging service) recently forced a public apology from Habitat for manipulating its conventions to attract unsuspecting traffic to its advertising.

keep in touch with contacts, there seems no doubt amongst the gurus of the likely long-term impact of social media. For instance, a recent Forrester report (Future of the Social Media) suggests that within two years social networks will be more powerful than corporate websites and CRM systems.

It is a fast-developing area and, while who-knows about the "2 year" prediction, there is no doubt that large numbers of relatively senior people are registering on such sites and often revealing large amounts of useful data and insights about themselves.

Already cheap online tools exist to allow anyone to quickly and easily create their own social media sites (for instance SocialGo.com and KickApps.com). As most corporate websites are currently simply brochures with a library attached, there is plenty of scope for innovative competitors to use social media technology (combined with powerful ideas and content) to create their own online communities of executives and other influencers.

So at the very least marketers should be watching and experimenting - both for spotting opportunities and also to make sure their firm (and their own skills) are not being left behind. For those who have yet to use it, LinkedIn is an ideal entry-level and this article aims to give them and infrequent users a tour of its basic marketing uses.

Many of its functions can now be easily replicated in your own website and present numerous opportunities, although that is beyond the scope of this article.

Using LinkedIn for prospecting:

For sales professionals and those with target prospects, LinkedIn can provide great intelligence on target individuals. If you are a big firm, it will also allow you to identify alumni on the inside who may help with guidance or introducing you to the right people (if asked). If it isn't already, it should be a first port-of-call in the prospecting and proposal process.

Its InMail facility allows members to directly contact other LinkedIn members who they don't know to introduce themselves. This is in fact the whole purpose of LinkedIn originally - that members can help each other to network. However, I have had at least one report of someone using this getting a very frosty reception from a prospect... so obviously this ethos is lost on some members!

For prospects with active profiles, LinkedIn will not only tell you basic details about their career, but also give huge insights into their network and interests. For instance, joining the same forums as some of prospects may allow you to subtly gain their attention through these.

It also works in reverse, with professional firm clients better able to scrutinise suppliers. Previously people would review the website of a firm and any information they were provided with. Now they are in a better position to review the individual partner through LinkedIn.



A double-edge sword

The transparency generated by social media has not been lost on numerous professions who have previously struggled to see inside businesses. The value of LinkedIn, which can often be used to piece together a good estimate of a business's management structure, is clearly useful to everyone from salespeople to head-hunters.

It also has not been lost on journalists. LinkedIn is a first port-of-call for many reporters when writing on a business or a specific individual. One City scribe recently relayed to me that he liked LinkedIn because executives who move often update their profiles ahead of formal announcements - allowing him to confirm rumours ahead of the announcement from the press office.

LinkedIn and SEO

A website isn't much use if it doesn't attract traffic because people can't find it. Search engine optimisation is well covered in numerous articles elsewhere so I won't go into details – suffice to say that LinkedIn helps through profiles linking to their company websites (the number of external links to and from a site is one of the criteria used to determine page rankings by search engines). LinkedIn profiles also get indexed by search engines – so providing it has appropriate keywords, it is another way of ensuring that, when someone searches, you have as many mentions as possible in the results page.

To reinforce this, content such as white papers and presentations can be placed on your LinkedIn profile, while postings (such as answers to questions and comments in the groups) can also contain links to useful content on your own website.

This applies equally to the individual member pages and the "Company" page on LinkedIn. Certainly there is an important role for the central marketing team to take control of this page to make sure it is full, fresh, enticing and SEO-optimised.

Initial basic LinkedIn checklist for marketing team:

- ☑ Are we registered as members and experimenting with it?
- ☑ How is the company described and can more be done with this?
- ☑ How are people in the firm using it and, if actively, what is their experience?
- ☑ What support, if any, do people in your firm want from the marketing team?
- ☑ How is intelligence from it being used for marketing and prospecting?
- ☑ Can we create an alumni forum (and how will this be managed)?
- ☑ Are there any hostages-to-fortune in people's profiles and can these be extinguished?
- ☑ Are people using it with due regard to it being a public document easily accessible to clients, prospects, recruits and the media?
- ☑ How can it be used to improve our SEO?

Creating and joining groups

There are numerous special interest groups on LinkedIn, perhaps too many. For instance, there are over 3,800 marketing-related professional groups, over 800 covering legal issues, although a more manageable 50 accountancy ones (which includes accountancy recruitment ones). There are also other categories such as networking, alumni and corporate groups.

While it is tempting for professionals to join their own interest groups, (eg intellectual property lawyers joining the IP law groups), people should also think about the sort of groups their prospects will join.

It is through joining these groups, engaging in the debates, and posting answers to online questions that professionals can subtly grab the attention of prospects and influencers.

For instance, some 30 per cent of LinkedIn's European membership comes from the IT, banking/finance and marketing/advertising sectors, and the retail sector has also shown strong growth recently.

LinkedIn opportunities



It is also easy to create your own group. However, with so many groups don't expect people to flock to it – you will need to promote it to your own contacts and other members, which is time-consuming. So the key consideration is “is it better to use an existing forum that I don't control but has a large active membership, or do I create my own and initially have to invest time in building network a group?”

Clearly the latter option will be easier for larger firms with greater contact bases, although people who are natural networkers or who are the first to a major issue, can consider this too!

A few other things to do:

Link to Angela Garry – she has over 17.5million contacts I have 70 by comparison, and the average amongst people in my network is well over 100). Connecting to Angela makes you only one stage from a huge number of users – which typically allows you to see more detailed profile notes (ie someone's name and details), subject to their chosen privacy settings. Joining groups can also enlarge the amount of “names contacts” you can view.

In LinkedIn you can recommend people in your network (and your comments appear on their profile). LinkedIn likes profiles of people with lots of recommendations. The best way to be recommended..... is to recommend others and they will return the favour (and if not, that speaks volumes either about them or you!).

In conclusion

Successful business developers know the importance of their network and referrals for bringing in opportunities. If used properly, LinkedIn amplifies the age-old principle of personal recommendation and referral.

Personally I think LinkedIn's vast scale and inclusiveness will soon be its undoing, with it being superseded by focused and proprietary social media sites based on special interests. However, at the moment it is the leading business social media site. Whether it is simply used as an online contacts management service or more actively through its networking forums, it is no doubt the shape of things to come and, for those not already using social media, it is the right entry level for people to cut their teeth.

What do you think?

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