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the Internet

Linked 

Getting Connected

WSI White Paper

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Introduction

Since its inception, LinkedIn has grown to include more than 55 million users in 200 countries worldwide. This is no accident. LinkedIn is based on the principle that every person is connected to one another by no more than six degrees of separation from everybody else. In other words, individuals can connect with one another simply by utilizing their network of contacts. And this is where LinkedIn can help business owners and their employees. The website keeps track of who knows whom and provides a means to connect people based on professional expertise, needs, and interests.

So, What Type of Contacts Do All of Us Have?

There are two kinds of contacts every person has – strong and weak. “Strong” contacts are family members, friends, and close business associates; “weak” contacts are those people we work with, and have done business with, but may not know very well. It is the “strong” contacts whom most people go to when they need something, and it is from “strong” contacts that, at least initially, a LinkedIn network is built.

According to Joseph Bartling of Spiderware.com, however, it is not our “strong” contacts that prove to be the most valuable when utilizing LinkedIn. It is more often than not our “weak” contacts who are able to help us achieve goals.¹ Bartling’s argument is that our close friends and colleagues are usually of little or no help in finding a new job, new employee, or new business opportunity because they belong to the same professional and social circles that we do and are therefore not in a position to recommend a person or business outside this network. Instead, it is our “weak” contacts that can open up new doors and introduce us to new people, information, and experiences.

LinkedIn helps business owners and professionals take advantage of these “weak” contacts to increase their sphere of influence. LinkedIn is specifically designed to help business professionals connect with each other easily and effectively.

LinkedIn, when used properly, can help business professionals generate leads, increase their credibility and visibility within their marketplace, communicate more effectively with their network of connections, and manage their brand’s reputation.

The Importance of a LinkedIn Strategy

Simply having a LinkedIn account is not enough to add value to a business. A business professional must also have a strategy to effectively network with other professionals on the site. This is where many business owners and professionals fail to utilize the system and maximize their potential for increased brand awareness and, ultimately, sales.

¹ Bartling, Joseph. “How to Double Your Income in 6 Months Using LinkedIn!” 2005.

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According to Lon Safko, social media expert and co-author of *The Social Media Bible: Tactics, Tools, and Strategies for Business Success*, it is very important to “take some time and really analyze what your existing social media strategy is.”²

In order to make the most of the opportunities available on LinkedIn, business owners must ask themselves (at the bare minimum) the following questions before jumping online and creating a profile:

- What are the needs of my business?
- What do I want to accomplish by using the site?
- Who am I trying to reach?

Knowing the answers to these questions can help business owners develop and maintain their profiles in a way that will most effectively attract the kind of contacts who will be most beneficial to them. Like any good marketing strategy, a LinkedIn presence should be managed with specific and measurable goals in mind. Keeping up a presence entails weekly, if not daily, action on a profile. In short, it requires time. Although time is generally considered a soft-cost for many business owners, even ten minutes a day is hard to find. So to maximize the efforts necessary to run a LinkedIn network, having a clear vision of what they would like to accomplish is of the utmost importance.

Once business owners have clearly defined goals, they can utilize all of the tools provided by the service to take advantage of opportunities that would not otherwise be afforded to them. In the following sections, this paper will outline how business owners can use their LinkedIn profiles to their advantage and solidify themselves within their marketplace.

Who Uses LinkedIn?

Before a LinkedIn strategy can be put into place, it is important to be aware of who is using the service. LinkedIn did a study of their users and this is what they found:

- Average Age of Users: 41
- Average HH Income: \$109,703
- 64% of users are male
- 95% of users are college graduates
- 37% of users hold graduate degrees
- 49% of users are business decision-makers
- Over 2.5M users research or review products online
- Over 1.9M users looked for or gave advice last month³

Understanding who uses LinkedIn allows users to leverage themselves among their network and use the available tools more effectively.

² Brake, David K. and Lon Safko. *The Social Media Bible: Tactics, Tools, and Strategies for Business Success*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009. Print.

³ @plan. Summer 2008.

LinkedIn and Lead Generation

Lead Generation is a marketing term that refers to the creation, or generation, of interest in a consumer to a product or service. This seems like a simple enough concept; however, talk to any marketing professional and he or she will tell you that farming for leads in a traditional manner can be a long, costly and exhaustive process.

This is why many professionals have begun using their LinkedIn contacts as a new way to identify and speak directly to prospects. Not only do they have the ability to search for these prospects amongst their current connections, but they can search via their connections' connections, and through the many groups that have formed within the LinkedIn network.

So how exactly does one find leads on LinkedIn? There are many strategies a business owner can use to both gain exposure and target a specific audience.

Through their Profile: When filling out a profile, users need to keep in mind who will be viewing it. Not only users' contacts be able to view their information, but so will anyone connected to those contacts' networks. It is key to make sure that the information added to a profile is relevant to the target audience a professional is trying to attract.

By Making Connections: The more connections business owners have, the more other people will want to be connected to them. For every contact business owners make, their networks grow exponentially, as they are now able to reach all of the contacts of their new contact, and all of the contacts of the contact's contacts. Keep in mind, every time information is changed or added on a profile, that information is disseminated to the web of people connected to the originator of the information. This means that a small addition can reach thousands of profiles within minutes. A business professional should make it a priority to make at least one new connection per day.

Through Groups: Belonging to groups, and starting groups on LinkedIn provides yet another avenue to reach prospects. Not only does group membership make it easier to connect to new people, but it provides an additional arena for disseminating a message to other professionals with similar interests. Whether it is a professional group, such as a marketing group, or a group for people who love to ski, finding groups that match the demographic of your target audience provides a free advertising opportunity.

A Word of Caution: Professionals who blatantly use LinkedIn to sell and offer nothing of service to others tend to find the results less than what they had hoped. When using the LinkedIn platform to announce a new product or service, a business professional must give an incentive to the prospect. They must answer the consumer's question: "How does it help me?"

Through Searches: Within LinkedIn, users have the ability to search the millions of other users who have an account. A search can be conducted via zip code, profession, number of connections, keyword relevance (more on this later), and number of endorsers, just to name a few. The way in which

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a search is phrased is the key to making sure the people who are being sought after will actually be receptive to the product or service being offered.

Again, when looking for leads, it is advised that the user go about it with a “givers” mentality rather than a “gainers” mentality. This is also true for building credibility. If there is something offered that will benefit other professionals, they will be more receptive to the message.

Building Credibility

When a business is represented on LinkedIn, it is represented through the person who created the profile. Therefore, credibility is gained not by the company’s presence, but by the actions of the individual within the LinkedIn network. As mentioned above, an individual who utilizes the “givers,” rather than the “gainers” mentality, will be more successful.

Credibility can be built through several avenues:

Through Your LinkedIn Profile:

A person’s profile provides the chance to make a good first-impression on a new connection. Many people, when creating their profile, use it as though it is an online resume. This, however, is not effective as the LinkedIn profile asks for more information than is usually found on a resume. In fact, the most effective profiles on LinkedIn are those that share personal as well as business information. According to Safko, “People buy from other people, not from other companies.”

So how do you, as a professional, gain credibility through your profile?

1. **Fill it in completely:** One of the first mistakes LinkedIn users make is not filling out their profiles completely. This includes filling in their employment history for at least the past five years, with a description of the responsibilities, large projects, and major clients pertinent to each job. Equally important is a person’s picture. Including an appropriate-for-business photograph, even if it is just a snapshot, immediately makes people more comfortable. Not only will past connections recognize a person more easily, but it also makes people who have not had personal introductions feel as though they already know each other.

Another key point that should be mentioned is the importance of making the profile interesting. It should be more than a laundry list of experience or interests. It needs to generate interest in the person beyond his or her role as a representative of a business; who they work for is secondary to who they are. This leads to the next point.

2. **Use the first person:** It has been found that using the first-person (I/we/us) is more effective at reaching people than the third-person (he/she/it), which is principally used for business writing. Again, the profile is not a resume or business document, it is a quick glimpse into the personality of an individual, so that personality needs to shine through.

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3. **Use keywords:** Using keywords, much like optimizing a website with Google or other search engines, is how people find each other. Using industry-specific terms when creating a profile can mean the difference between being found and being overlooked.
4. **Get personal, but not too personal:** In his article “How to Use Social Networking Sites to Drive Business,” J.J. McCorvey writes, “Profiles allow you to include things like hobbies, favorite music, etc. Including tidbits like these can make your page feel warmer and more personable.” He goes on to warn, “Don’t be the ‘TMI’ poster boy or girl. (i.e. ‘The wife and I are on our way to have dinner – kids are with the grandparents’).”⁴ Including hobbies and interests connects people, and in many cases, gives them a reason to make contact. Too much information, or information not appropriate for a business audience, on the other hand, can inhibit a desire to connect.

Answering Questions:

A fundamental networking strategy, whether used in a weekly scheduled meeting, a weekend conference, or online, is to be seen as the person with answers. Whether it is giving a referral for a plumber to a colleague whose toilet overflowed, or providing information on a product or service, if knowledge is useful and shared, it gives credibility to the information provider.

Lewis Howes, in his e-book *LinkedWorking*, states that “if you continue to put yourself out there and provide useful information for those who need it, then they will begin to see you as a thought leader and an expert in that industry.” He goes on to say that earning expertise is easy. First, one must look at the discussion boards and find questions in the areas in which they have knowledge. By simply browsing the categories, an individual can find categories they are familiar with. Then, once a question has been found, answer it. The answers need to be made public. It does not benefit a business owner to give a helpful answer and not have that answer seen by everyone who is also looking into it. If the answer is clear, concise, and helpful, other users will begin to view the answerer as an expert.⁵

Through Endorsements/Testimonials:

Here is where “strong” connections can be extremely beneficial to a business professional. It is to the benefit of an individual to write an endorsement, or testimonial, for every direct contact they have. Not only will this posting be visible to everyone in a user’s network, but to everyone in that user’s contacts’ network. Again, this creates visibility and keeps the professional’s name in front of a large audience. Perhaps more importantly, offering an endorsement prompts the endorsee to write one in return. Again, this posting will be seen throughout both networks of people. Plus, every time that profile is viewed, potential connections will recognize that other professionals believe in the product or service being provided.

⁴ McCorvey, J.J. “How to Use Social Networking Sites to Drive Business.” *Inc.com*. Jan. 25, 2010.

⁵ Howes, Lewis. *The Underground Secrets to Making Money & Taking Control of Your Industry on LinkedIn*. *Linkedworking.com*. 2009.

By Posting Blogs and Articles:

One strategy many Internet marketing companies suggest to their clients is writing and publishing articles and blogs on their web pages and online magazines. These blogs and articles not only help with exposure and web optimization, but they also help professionals establish themselves as the experts and leaders in their industry. LinkedIn offers tools that connect users' blogs from their web pages to their LinkedIn accounts. Every time a new post is made, it automatically shows up on the pages of everyone they are connected with, thereby reinforcing those individuals as experts.

By Joining Groups:

Joining groups on LinkedIn not only increases spheres of contact, but because people are not automatically granted membership, the exclusivity also creates an appearance of expertise. After all, if users are not knowledgeable in their industry, the group would not have accepted them.

This idea can be seen in everyday business practices. In the reception area of offices, a visitor can see certificates of membership to various organizations, whether it is a small business networking group, a chamber of commerce, an industry-specific organization, or a charitable community organization. Membership gives the appearance of value – specifically that a business or individual has something to offer others that entitles them to be a member of that group. Being a member of a group on LinkedIn has the same effect.

Communication with Connections

As mentioned earlier, users' goals for using LinkedIn will determine what type of communication they send to their connections, and in what manner they will communicate. One thing is certain, the opportunity for exposure on LinkedIn is great, so the more users communicate with their connections, the more successful they will be.

With that being said, there are many tools in LinkedIn that can be used to communicate. As mentioned numerous times already, the first step is optimizing the profile page.

Optimizing a Profile:

A profile is optimized when it is filled-in completely and when it offers information others are seeking. This not only includes using keywords but creating content on the page that is interesting to others. This takes place in the hobbies/interests section, as well as in status updates.

Status updates on LinkedIn should not be used the same as on other social networking sites. Unlike social sites, LinkedIn status updates should be used to announce exciting business-related news, whether it is a new product offering or the announcement of a new job opening. These updates are seen on users' network home pages, as well as the connections of everyone in their network's networks.

Asking and Answering Questions:

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Not only does asking and answering questions give people credibility and exposure, but it is also a means to communicate with prospects and potential connections in a forum where they are actively seeking to gain and give knowledge. Questions can consist of the following: business owner seeking marketing or investment advice, someone looking for a referral, or someone who needs clarity on the definition of a new product or service. Asking and answering questions connects people, and that is what LinkedIn is all about.

Blogging and Posting Articles:

Erik Qualmann asserts the following key points about blogs:

- Currently, there are over 200,000,000 blogs
- 54% of bloggers post content or tweet daily
- 25% of search results for the world's top 20 largest brands are links to user-generated content
- 34% of bloggers post opinions about products & brands⁶

Moreover:

- 15% of bloggers spend 10 or more hours each week blogging
- 70% of bloggers are organically talking about brands on their blog⁷

These statistics show how viral communication is changing the way businesses sell their products and services. More and more consumers are looking to consumer-generated content to gain information on products and companies. Not only are their voices heard in the article or blog itself, but in their comments as well. Additionally, LinkedIn provides a valuable tool to link a blog on a business's website to its LinkedIn profile page. Once the posting appears, it is automatically disseminated to the business' network of contacts.

Inviting Connections to Join Groups:

Inviting connections to join groups is another avenue to utilize in order to reach a desired market. Not only should users join groups, but they should also encourage others to do so. This not only helps the invitee, but it also positions the individual as one who is actively trying to assist their connections, as opposed to just looking to gain something from them.

Brand Reputation Management

Brand Reputation Management is the application of marketing techniques to increase the product or brand's perceived positive reputation to the customer and thereby increase brand franchise and brand

⁶ Qualmann, Erik. "Statistics Show Social Media Is Bigger Than You Think." Socialnomics.net. Aug 11, 2009.

⁷ "Very Interesting Social Media Statistics: Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn and more..." trak.in. Feb, 2010.

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equity. As mentioned above, 70% of bloggers are organically talking about brands on their blog.⁸ This means that consumers are controlling the reputation of a brand simply because they have access to each other's opinions. Thus, using LinkedIn to help a business manage its reputation, both online and offline, can prove invaluable.

1. **Polishing the profile:** Making sure a profile page is well-written, concise, and interesting are the first steps toward managing a brand's image. As previously stated, the profile page is about a person, but that person, especially a business owner, is the face of the business online. Therefore everything needs to be clean and buttoned-up. Remember, it is other professionals who will view that profile, so it needs to impress.
2. **Your name:** Using the name that most people know you by seems like a no-brainer, but many people go by a nickname of some sort in their daily life, and on formal documents, they tend to use their formal name. On LinkedIn, the idea is to be found and to connect with as many people as possible; therefore, the name a person is most commonly known by should be used. For instance, use Jack Jones rather than Jonathan Randolph Jones, Jr.
3. **Get endorsements / testimonials:** The reputation value of being endorsed by a former colleague or manager is immeasurable. Receiving these testimonials not only increases the reputation of users, but of the businesses they represent.
4. **Set up applications:** Not only can business owners connect their blogs and Twitter accounts to their LinkedIn profiles, but by utilizing the applications provided, they can find, create, and market events and public speaking engagements; share presentations; analyze company buzz; and conduct market research polls.
5. **Join groups:** Joining groups, as discussed previously, builds credibility and awareness amongst a separate network of people. This credibility bolsters both the individual and the company he or she represents.
6. **Customize your profile URL:** Changing the URL of the LinkedIn webpage helps reinforce a brand, and it also allows business owners to promote their profiles on other marketing collateral. Instead of a long URL that is hard to reproduce, a custom or vanity URL can be created. Then the address can be printed on business cards, letterhead, and brochures. The difference is LinkedIn.com/in/BusinessOwner versus LinkedIn.com/in/somethingreallylongwith#sandletters.

Conclusion

The strength of LinkedIn and other social networking websites lies not in the websites themselves, but in knowing how to use them to maximize exposure and networking opportunities. LinkedIn provides a platform for business owners and professionals to connect in a way never before possible. Knowing what the site has to offer and how to use it, can strengthen a company's hold in its market, improve its reputation, and ultimately improve its bottom line.

⁸ "Very Interesting Social Media Statistics: Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn and more..." trak.in. Feb, 2010.

About the Author



Gregg Towsley has been a WSI Consultant since 2007. Gregg Towsley has a wide range of entrepreneurial, project management, and business development experience. Prior to owning and operating his WSI franchise (WSI Quality Solutions), Gregg spent 10 years as a business manager and sales executive in the software industry. Over the past three years, Gregg has provided Internet solutions to over 80 customers, including services such as: social media marketing, paid internet advertising, search engine marketing, website analytics, and email marketing.

As a noted speaker and writer regarding internet based marketing and local search, Mr. Towsley understands the unique challenges of marketing and advertising business on the internet. WSI has helped many small and medium sized businesses rise above their competition on Google by leveraging social media marketing and local search engine marketing.

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