

In-trinsic

/in'trinsk/ :adj belonging naturally, essential

Word Count: 1043

Should you social network your business?

Are social networking sites like MySpace or FaceBook likely to be a good fit for your goals?

The rapid rise of Web 2.0 and social media sites has brought a new generation of web-based communities and influencers who share opinions, experiences, and perspectives. In recent years the trend has moved out of the teenager's or geek's bedroom to excite all age groups; and companies and not-for-profits alike ignore at their peril this new opportunity to engage actively in conversations with communities and key online influencers.

But it's a minefield for the unwary or the unsure. Communications must have intrinsic value and interest for an audience which has the power to talk back (and bite back) as never before!

The shape of a social network helps determine a network's usefulness to its individuals. Smaller, tighter networks can be less useful to their members than networks with lots of loose connections. More open networks, with many weak ties and social connections, are more likely to introduce new ideas and opportunities to their members. In other words, a group of friends who only do things with each other already share the same knowledge and opportunities. A group of individuals with connections to other social worlds are likely to have access to a wider range of information.

Social networks have also been used to examine how organisations interact with each other, characterising the many informal connections that link executives together, as well as associations and connections between individual employees at different organisations. For example, power within organisations often comes more from the degree to which an individual within a network is at the centre of many relationships than actual job title.

Social networks can also play a key role in hiring, in business success, and in job performance. Networks provide ways for companies to gather information, deter competition, and collude in setting prices or policies.

In-trinsic

/in'trinsk/ :adj belonging naturally, essential

Opportunities in Social Networking

Still with us? While not for everyone, social networking can provide interesting opportunities for the right organisation. What are some of the ways that social networking sites might help?

1. Establish a simple Web presence.

MySpace and Facebook offer easy-to-use tools that will help you set up a Web presence. If you just need to put up some simple materials, and you're planning an open, collaborative outreach strategy that involves the type of people likely to be on social networking sites, creating your initial Web presence using these tools could be an interesting option.

2. Promoting specific actions or petitions.

People check their email when they want to read and write. They log in to Facebook or MySpace when they want to take action. For many, an email petition is an annoyance to be deleted, while Facebook applications are fun, social, and available when you're ready to click a button, add your name to a petition, volunteer a little something about yourself, and compare your responses with friends. If you know and respect their culture, social networking sites can be an effective way to encourage people to take action or spread the word.

3. Consolidating existing, unofficial social networks related to your organisation.

Sometimes it's not about what you've created, but what already exists. Some of your supporters may already be using social networking tools to informally find and keep tabs on one another. In this case, forming an official group and profile can help all your supporters' network in one place. But do so gently. You're only there to support their efforts, not ruin their fun.

4. Informal outreach that blends the personal and professional.

One director reported posting a message to one of her social networks one morning about the pastries she was eating for breakfast, soon followed by another message to report on survey responses that had just come in. Social networks can be a useful, immediate way to stay in touch with a group of people, and let them know what's going on with you, your organisation — even your carbo-loading.

In-trinsic

/in'trinsk/ :adj belonging naturally, essential

5. Researching VIPs, potential employees, and others.

You can find tons of information about people — and a lot of possible contacts — within social networking sites. For instance, it can be a useful place to research the background and affiliations of potential employees. One of the people we spoke to used his social networking contacts to track down an internationally recognised speaker to see if she would be willing to speak at an event. The fact that the speaker turned him down misses the point: He got close enough, through his social network, to invite her in the first place.

6. Strengthening relationships between people who already know each other.

When you have a group of people who have participated in an event, workshop, or other meet, you can foster their relationships through online social networking. By allowing group members to post messages and resources, you encourage them to stay in touch and continue their involvement with one another and with your organisation.

7. Encourage and respond to constituent feedback quickly.

If you want to get quick and honest feedback, social networks are a great way to test your commitment to open communication. Make it as easy as possible for people to find you and make requests (either within the site, or privately), and make sure you respond quickly, personally, and where appropriate, publicly.

But, Are Social Networks for You?

So should you invest in creating a profile or networks on social networking sites? It depends on your organisation. To succeed with social networking sites, you'll likely need a staff member or consultant who has a passion for working with these types of sites. You'll also need to establish goals to understand if the time commitment is worthwhile. For instance, if you're trying to expand your community, how many new people linked with your cause would make it worthwhile? Be open to alternative goals, too: Perhaps your primary purpose with social networks is just to get your name in front of the younger members of your audience.

In-trinsic

/in'trinsk/ :adj belonging naturally, essential

More than most technologies, success in social networks depends on your sense of adventure. There are a lot of opportunities, but many of them are not thoroughly explored or tested. You might achieve great success — or it could all end up being a great big waste of time. Think through the challenges and opportunities carefully, and then decide whether social networking is right for you.