

# In-trinsic

/in'trinsk/ :adj belonging naturally, essential

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## Six Signs that Social Networking isn't for you.

*Is it a question of time or capability? We explore the potential reasons to not social network, with just one exception!*

You've likely heard of Web sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn. These sites allow individuals and sometimes organisations to create online profiles, discover others who share their interests, and create an online network of contacts and supporters.

Social networking sites have received a lot of attention from the not-for-profit world because they align with not-for-profits' desire to reach out to larger communities. If your local animal shelter could tap into a network of cat lovers in your area, the logic goes, wouldn't that allow it to find homes for even more pets? Adding to the buzz, there are a number of success stories about not-for-profits using social networks to reach new volunteers, locate audiences interested in their cause, build up supporter lists, and even raise money. This equally applies to SME's.

On the other hand, the success stories can be a bit thin compared to the number experimenting with these sites, and the investment in the staff time required building and maintaining an online social network can be substantial. Each organisation has its own set of priorities, and it's unlikely that social networking will top the list for every organisation.

Who is likely to get the most value out of social networking sites? We looked beyond the success stories to discover tales of only middling success, and even of disappointment.

Just because you've heard a few success stories doesn't mean that social networking sites are worth the investment for your organisation. What are the signs that social networking might not be a good fit for your priorities?

### 1. You're still trying to get a handle on your basic software infrastructure.

There are many ways software can enhance your organisation's effectiveness and efficiency. Social networking sites should not be the first tools you turn to, however.

Almost all organisations will get more bang for their buck by ensuring that their computers are networked and backed up regularly; by purchasing robust software to help staff members do their jobs; by maintaining a useful constituent database; and by exploring the benefits of an e-newsletter or email action alerts. Once these fundamentals are in order, it makes more sense to turn your attention to experimental areas like social networking.

*(One exception: If you're looking for an easy way to build a simple Web site and your audience overlaps substantially with the younger and more tech-savvy audiences likely to be using MySpace or Facebook, it's worth considering using social networking tools to create a Web presence.)*

### 2. Your target audiences aren't using social networking tools

Social networking works best when the people you're trying to reach or work with are already members of a community like Facebook or MySpace. Look for opportunities to interact with current or new constituents in the sites they're already using, rather than expecting them to join you on a new site.

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While these sites' audiences are expanding among older and niche audiences, they are still predominantly young and tech-savvy. Some of the niche social networking tools can help you reach different demographics, but it's important to know where the folks you're trying reach already are.

How should you go about learning what sites your target audiences are using? There's no better way than asking them, either through a survey or informal one-on-one interviews.

### **3. You don't have time to experiment with something that might not work.**

Online communities aren't self-maintaining. They need you to promote them, cultivate them, and give them direction. If your network blossoms, you may be able to step back and watch your users produce and share content. But getting to that point takes a lot of time and effort.

What's more, this work is not likely to yield immediate, measurable, bottom-line returns on your time investment. There are some examples of organisations attracting large numbers of supporters to sign a petition or to become “friends” within a social networking site. This can be helpful in marketing your organisation, but it's often hard to convert these online associations into more traditional supporters. With most social networking tools, for example, it's difficult to contact large numbers of friends cost-effectively.

The successful organisation has a relatively rare combination of true passion and a means to lend a sense of urgency to their cause. Not everyone is a winner, but a proud few — the super activists — are very effective, on average reaching 150 people. If you have the skill, time, and inclination to mould yourself into a super activist, and reaching 150 people would be a big win for your organisation, then social networking might work well for you. But keep in mind that there's no guarantee.

### **4. You're not willing to deal with technologies that don't work as well as they could.**

Social networking is not yet a well-oiled machine. The technology is changing rapidly. Things break. If your organisation decides to invest in social networking, you'll need a reliable consultant or a staff member who is willing to experiment, figure out how to get stuff working, and approach these tools with a sense of adventure. They'll need patience to deal with platforms that don't necessary work as well as they could, or even as well as advertised.

### **5. You're not ready to invest in gaining a real understanding of the medium.**

In order to have success with social networking, it's critical that you understand the culture of the communities you're joining. Typical social networking site users expect a collaborative, open approach. Anything that seems like a hard sell or like it was put together by a committee will be ignored, or, worse, ridiculed.

### **6. You want clear editorial control over your brand and message.**

People who use social networking tools are not interested in promoting your brand or following your message guidelines. When you get involved with these sites, it's hard to control the context in which your organisation shows up. For instance, it's completely possible that you'll appear in someone's list of “friends” alongside those with which you do not want to be associated. Those who succeed with social networking do so by letting their constituents have a substantial voice in their message, rather than by setting firm rules and expecting users to follow them.