

Social Media for Business Sake

By Brent Leary, *Inc. Technology*

Social media has made it easier for us to connect with people on the basis of common business interests. It also now rivals search for driving online traffic. Businesses need to embrace, not ignore these new tools.

Another year, another birthday. But this one was different from the ones before. This year I received Happy Birthday tweets (via Twitter), drinks sent through Facebook, Monk-Emails and various other text messages, e-mails, and instant messages. And, yes, I did receive a few phone calls and an actual birthday card (thanks to Mom and Dad).

Parents aside, the vast majority of birthday wishes I received were not from family and friends, but from people I have never met. They came from [Digg-ers](#), [Stumblers](#) and [Mixxers](#). They came from blog authors I've left comments on after reading one of their posts. They also came from people who read my blog regularly. Facebook drinks were sent by people who share my tastes in technology, business, and sports. And these well wishes came from countries I have never been to, and in languages I couldn't even read.

Many business people are still very skeptical of the hype surrounding social media -- mostly because they really don't understand how it can lead to real business. They do understand the importance of Google and other search engines: how they can drive traffic to their sites when people search for information about them or products and services they provide. But many times the traffic coming from search engines is meaningless, because the words used by searchers could have a completely different meaning than what they represent to you and your business. Just think of how many times the Hilton in Paris received meaningless traffic from people really searching for Paris Hilton.

Social sites -- not just for kids anymore

Sites like Yahoo! and Google are usually at the top of the lists of most traveled sites. But according to Alexa.com, six of the top ten sites are social sites like YouTube, MySpace and Facebook. According to Internet research firm Comscore, worldwide visits to social networking sites grew by 34 percent last year, with two out of every three Internet users making visits. Not only are more people joining these sites, they are very active on them. Comscore's recent Widget Matrix report found 147 million U.S. Internet users have added a widget to their user profiles. Facebook's top widget, Top Friends, received more than six million views last November alone, accounting for roughly 30 percent of total application views on the site.

This activity isn't just being generated by young folks. The young at heart are signing on to sites like Facebook and MySpace. A big reason why these sites are doubling in population at ridiculous speeds has to do with those 35 and over. These people are interested in forming relationships as well -- professional relationships that can increase their knowledge levels and business prospects. Facebook has over 100,000 users older than 64. And I bet a number of you are bypassing Google and heading directly to Wikipedia when searching for certain kinds of information.

Building deeper relationships

The reason for the rise of social sites shouldn't come as a big surprise. It's the same reason that the telephone, radio, and television became popular. And why the Web is indispensable to us now. Social sites have made it easier for us to connect with people on a much deeper level than we could have imagined a few years ago. In some cases, I know more about people I've never met in person than I do with some of my neighbors. And while these newly formed relationships are typically based on common business interests, they are reinforced and extended by social networks, bookmarks, comments and a host of other activities.

Additionally, business opportunities also seem to increase as online collaborations widen and deepen. These business opportunities usually come in form of direct sales, great referrals, or increased exposure which could lead to increased business. All because it's very easy to collaborate and share information on social sites. And this can be as simple as answering a question on LinkedIn Answers, Digg-ing someone's blog entry, or writing a book review that everyone in your Facebook network can see. These actions provide the context missing from the algorithms and formulas of the search engines, giving social sites an extra dimension that needs to be understood by people wanting to connect with other people, regardless if it's for business or personal reasons.

So don't overlook the importance of social media to your business right now, as well as in the future. Having your websites search-engine optimized is important to being found on the Web. But take a closer look at those search results and you'll probably see a growing number of links from social sites being included. If you're advertising on Google AdWords, you may want to check out Facebook Ads, which gives businesses another avenue to get in front of the right audience based on demographic and activity data Facebook has at its disposal. Or maybe just check out what your colleagues are bookmarking at Del.icio.us, or StumbleUpon. Maybe you even step up and become a [Super Mixer](#) at Mixx.com. Whatever sites you choose to focus on, it's time to take social media personally, for business' sake.

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