

### Social Networking – a Panacea, a Promoter or a Pain

Most business people these days receive endless requests to join a plethora of online social networking sites. These sites represent an opportunity to connect from the comfort of an office, home or the closest Panera to literally millions of individuals without ever leaving contact with a computer laptop, netbook or smart phone. There is an ongoing question of the value of these networking sites and whether they promote accomplishing the goals that are sought. For most professionals the goal of such social networking websites is to connect to an individual or individuals that will either expand their business, promote their career, or support their search for a new position.

No question, there is much for us to learn on sites such as LinkedIn, ZoomInfo, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc. but the real question is, "Is social networking a panacea, a promoter or a pain?" Depending on the goal, it can be all three. One individual claimed that through LinkedIn, she had more than 1,000,000 friends. Webster's New World College Dictionary has a very different definition of the word "friend" than the social networking world. Webster's defines friend as 1) A person whom one knows well and is fond of 2) A person on the same side in a struggle; ally. It seems that "friend" in the social networking sense is one thing while those who have invested literally thousands of hours of their lives in developing relationships see the word "friend" differently. In the social networking world, a friend is made when a connection between two individuals through a mutual connection occurs. It is probable that there is no relationship between these two new "friends" other than they have the names and e-mail addresses in their e-mail address books that they can share.

Recently, a marketing vice president for LinkedIn stated that LinkedIn is "a tool", a promoter, and certainly, as a business person, there can be strong benefits attained from LinkedIn and other networking sites. These sites can provide excellent personal and professional information for expanding one's network and helping to determine the connectedness required to begin a business relationship. Connectedness is the place where our lives intersect—where we have common experiences, education, work history, mutual acquaintances, etc. that can be the source for meaningful conversations used to promote and build personal and business relationships.

For many today, these networking sites



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represent an opportunity to attain many contacts quickly. Some professionals think that social networking is representative of our society—the need for instant gratification. In the social networking arena, one can presumably have all the benefits of having "friends" without ever having to do the real work of friendship—having taken the time to get to know someone and

understand who and what they are all about over a period of time. True friendship requires a personal investment of time, energy and interest in an individual over a period of perhaps many years. There is some reluctance on the part of well "networked" individuals to share their networks with individuals who have made little personal investment of time and energy to building their own network. After all, friendship is about sharing and frequently social networking is about receiving, not sharing. Executives often find that the sheer volume of requests for inclusion into their networks is reason to question their own participation. The jury is still out as to the value of participation for many of these individuals.

For some the "panacea" of the social networking phenomena comes from the ability to connect to literally millions of individuals instantly. A return on that personal investment of time is attained if the objective of the social networking is met. There is not great evidence that there is a great return on investment. If you are a relational person versus a transactional individual, then social networking may not be for you. Some individuals that request inclusion into your network may be offended by your failing to respond to their invitations. Protecting the network that you have worked diligently to create and maintain may be paramount to you so don't feel pressured to respond to every invitation. How often have you been invited to join a network where you have never even heard of the individual making the request?

So, what is the answer? Panacea, promoter or pain. As in most cases it depends on your personal needs—lots of loose impersonal connections, a tool to build relationships or more requests and invitations than you can count. As always, it depends on your perspective.

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