

READY NET GO ... NEWS

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<http://www.readynetgo.net>

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Tip of the Month

Safe tips for Social Networking

Social networking can be a rewarding experience if you keep the following concepts in mind:

1. Online forums, chat rooms and messaging services provide an **anonymous medium** for people to interact. You cannot be completely sure that the person you are interacting with is legitimate.
2. It's easy for **people to lie or fabricate situations** due to the lack of physical contact. You cannot read body language (non-verbal communication) to gain insight into someone's intentions.
3. **The Internet is a public resource**; information that you post online can potentially be read by anyone at anytime. Although privacy controls have been set up, there is still a chance that these controls can fail causing your information to be viewable by the general public at any time. Keep in mind that cached webpages can be kept active indefinitely.
4. Identity theft, stalking, slander, and hacking are real concepts that occur every day. **There are few accountability measures** in place in regards to businesses that fail to protect individuals' data.

Overall, be smart in safeguarding your information. The best course of action for people, whether for business or personal reasons, is to become educated about issues that may arise in interacting online and taking precautions to limit potentially damaging circumstances.

Online Social Networking

A new style of communication... Is it beneficial?

Communication is essential to our way of life. Think about all of the conversations you have whether on the phone, in-person, or via email and the list will probably be a lot longer than you imagine. Entrepreneurs have tapped into this desire to communicate and married it with technology in a process called social networking.

How they work

Social networking sites are simple to use. You create an account (free), enter your personal or business information into a form, post your information to the website and then start communicating with people via the web interface. Each site may have a hook to entice you to join. Some social networking sites are geared for business users, like LinkedIn while others are geared more for the teen crowd, like MySpace. Others may be group specific like those that cater to the baby boomer generation, music lovers or self-help groups.

The idea behind social networking is that you have the opportunity to interact with a potentially large group of individuals with whom you would not normally be able to interact (see *Figure 1*). Whether you want to interact with colleagues, are recently relocated, or looking for a dream job, most people enjoy interacting with people who have the same interests or objectives.

WWW (Websites Worth Watching)

1. www.fallinpa.com – Interested in fall foliage? Check out this site to see where the scenery is peaking in PA.
2. www.lumosity.com/iq_tests - Want to test your memory or cognitive processing speed? Check out these ingenious tests.
3. <http://www.transl8it.com> – Need help with Text Messages? Site will convert or decipher any phrase.

The social networking interface allows you to list your favorite activities, resumé, opinions, and aspirations and then allow a select group or the whole world to read about who you are. Individuals will read your profile and decide if they want to communicate with you. Likewise, you can read others' profiles and decide if you want to make contact with them.

Considering the widespread adoption of instant messaging and blogging in our lives, it's no wonder that social networking sites are successful. About a third of the US population has an account on a social networking site (that's more than 100 million people).

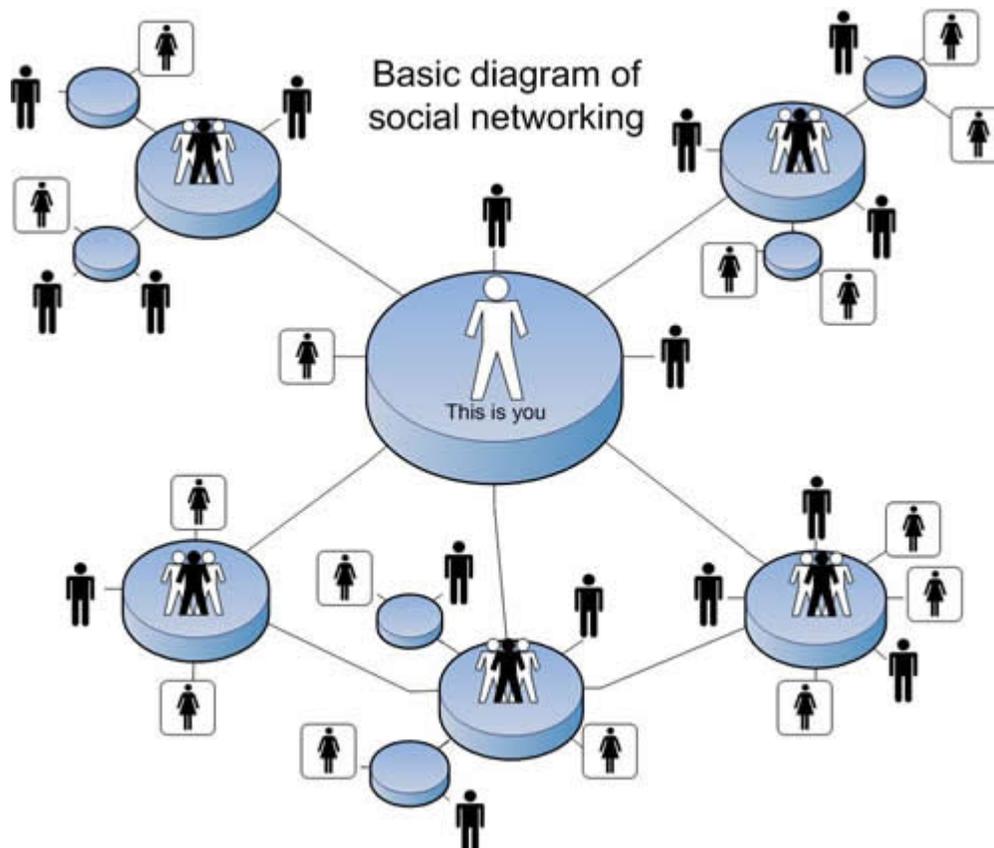


Figure 1. Online communities allow you to reach individuals who share your interests quickly and efficiently. Although you may only know a few people and be part of a few groups, those individuals also have networks that extend even further. Since social networking encourages linking and sharing of information, you can reach far greater numbers of people by joining a social networking site.

Benefits of Social Networking

One of the main benefits of social networking for **businesses** is the “low-cost” market exposure. Just as blogs are being used to create “buzz” around a certain product or service, social networking sites have proven to be excellent means of “**getting the word out**”. Instead of having a face to face meeting with multiple people, you gain referrals by being recommended by your trusted sources. Since the system contains full profiles of individuals, your connections are much richer immediately compared to conversing via email or phone. A referral to a vendor’s colleague may reveal that you went to the same college or have a similar interest in Thai cuisine. In the sales world, this relationship building information is extremely valuable and can work wonders in the realm of networking.

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For past newsletter issues, go to: <http://www.readynetgo.net/newsletter.htm>

If you keep a daily or weekly blog, either for work or personal use, social networking sites are a good place to **advertise** by posting the link to your blog. When it comes to online searching, the more places you have a link to your website, the more traffic you're likely to receive.

For **teachers and non-profits**, online social networking allows individuals to join groups or participate in national meetings that are cost prohibitive or are impossible to attend due to time constraints. For example, people can **watch a video collectively**, **compare ideas** and **share successes** all through the online interface.

Employees of businesses can use social networking sites to market their company's products and services. Many large businesses promote social networking sites to get people in different departments talking, as a sort of morale boosting activity.

Individuals can use social networking sites to **market themselves** in looking for a new job or promotion or to connect with people at work, in various communities or around the world.

Individuals can also use social networking sites to stay in touch with **friends and family** providing a much richer environment for exchanging personal information. Uploading photos from a recent trip or posting messages about your upcoming party are quick and convenient and you don't have to worry that your email got blocked because your attachments were too large. Instead of maintaining your own personal website, join a social networking site with family or friends and you'll find it easy to keep in touch (as long as you update your profile now and then).

Although social networking sites have many positive attributes, there are disadvantages as well, some of which could be quite serious if not addressed right from the start.

Disadvantages of Social Networking

Security and **lost productivity** are two of the biggest issues with online social networking sites. Although there are security controls in place at many of these sites, when you create an account, in most cases, you are allowing your personal information to be accessible to people around the world. While you have control of who has access to your information, most people don't set up these controls leaving themselves open to potential risks like identity theft, SPAM and even infiltration of their company network.

On the **personal side**, there have been several instances where predators have contacted children through these sites using fictitious information. MySpace, in particular, has received much attention in this area and has hired security experts to put policies in place to try to prevent predation.

On the **business side**, companies have had their networks breached in the form of virus attacks and cross-site scripting attacks. [Cross-site scripting attacks include phishing, browser hijacking and malicious script insertion on webpages (malformed HTML code) – for specific examples related to social networking visit: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cross-site_scripting]

Top Social Networking Sites as of April 2007

1. MySpace
2. Facebook
3. Bebo
4. iMeem
5. BlackPlanet
6. Tagged
7. Yahoo! 360
8. Xanga
9. hi5
10. Gaiaonline
11. LiveJournal
12. Friendster
13. Orkut
14. myYearbook
15. Flixster

Source: Hitwise, May 2007

Identity Theft and Virus Attacks

While security is on the minds of all network managers, people in general don't think much about keeping their private data private. Hopefully, most people know to keep their credit cards, bank accounts, and social security numbers private but many people don't think twice about their address, phone number, or email. In the hands of a criminal, this information could have devastating consequences as well.

In a study conducted by Sophos, an Internet Security firm, 200 individuals were randomly selected on Facebook and asked to become "Friends" with a fabricated user. Based on their findings, a majority of individuals contacted divulged their email address, date of birth, full address and/or location. In a worst case scenario, this information can be used to **track an individual, assume someone's identity, or access a company's network**. As an example, an email from a supposed new colleague could actually harbor a virus or Trojan horse that once opened can wreak havoc on a network.

Because of the open nature of most social networking sites, all businesses need to **implement HR policies on the acceptable practices** surrounding its use. Think about your organization and the situations that may arise that could impact your business. If an employee divulges a prototype of a new product on a company sanctioned networking site, how will you react? Do employees know what information is safe to divulge in their profile? Are they aware of the security and privacy controls that most networking sites have set up? Clear guidelines need to be created and discussed with employees prior to instituting a blog or access to a social networking site (learn more in next month's newsletter).

Lost Productivity

In addition to privacy issues and the threat of infiltration, lost productivity is another issue that could cost businesses. Individuals can spend hours engaged in online communities especially ones that are geared more for entertainment and leisure activities rather than business networking. Experts agree that ignoring the issue or overreacting and banning sites aren't the best approaches. Since social networking sites are becoming ubiquitous, **employers would best serve their mission if they institute fair policies** around their use (and reinforce them if employees step out of bounds). Contact us for options on how employers can monitor employee Internet use.

Conclusion

Currently there are hundreds of social networking sites on the web in which you can join and participate. Interest in these sites has been increasing steadily over the past two years and analysts agree that social networking is here to stay. Although the popularity of some sites may change, interacting online with friends, family, coworkers and even strangers is convenient, fun and productive. While there are many advantages to online social networking there are also some very serious disadvantages as well. The one concept that social networking sites do not convey strongly enough is that **they are not policing people's profiles**. You do not go through a background check when you sign up and your communication is not monitored. Individuals, both adults and children (under age 18), need to recognize this and remember it when they are creating their profile and interacting with other users.

Businesses must set up clear policies of online networking sites both for personal and business use and they must be re-visited as technology changes and issues arise. Social networking can be advantageous but with all web applications, security, privacy and productivity must be monitored to ensure that online collaboration achieves its intended result.