Is social networking a passing fad, or here to stay? It is a "must" for business owners and consultants, but what about for captive employees? Is social networking for *you*?

Is Social Networking for You?

By JACK MOLISANI | *Fellow*

LET'S START BY defining some terms. From Wikipedia.com:

Social Media vs. Social Networking

▸ WEB 2.0—Refers to a website that allows its users to interact with other users or to change website content, in contrast to non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of provided information.

▸ SOCIAL MEDIA—Refers to a collective group of web properties whose content is primarily published by users, not direct employees of the property. Examples of social media sites would include Wikipedia, Snapfish, and YouTube. What these sites have in common is that the *public* contributes content, not the company.

▸ SOCIAL NETWORKING—Refers to a social network service focused on building … social relations among people who share interests and/or activities. Examples of social networking sites would include LinkedIn, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. These sites enable people to network online and share information for purposes

such as developing business leads and reconnecting with high school classmates.

As the popularity of social networking sites exploded, members of the sites began using them to market products and services. The sites, in turn, needed a way to continue to offer their services for free. Revenue from advertisers enabled them to do that.

Enter "Social Media Marketing."

Size Does Matter

It is easy to understand why companies are going after these online audiences. Last year, Nielsen NetRatings (the media traffic monitoring company) stated in a press release:

> **Time Spent on Facebook up 700 Percent, but MySpace.com Still Tops for Video**
>
> NEW YORK, NY—June 02, 2009—As theories circulate about the actual dollar value of sites like Facebook and MySpace—just last week analysts placed Facebook's worth at $10 billion—there is no question that people continue to gravitate towards social networking and blog sites. In the U.S. alone, total minutes spent on social networking sites has increased 83 percent year-over-year. In fact, total minutes spent on Facebook increased nearly 700 percent year-over-year, growing from 1.7 billion minutes in April 2008 to 13.9 billion in April 2009, making it the No. 1 social networking site for the month.

While Facebook traffic increased 700 percent, Twitter traffic increased over 3,000 percent over the same period!

In short, there are just too many people spending too much time online to ignore these publishing and marketing opportunities. The lines between what is purely "social media," "social networking," and "social network marketing" have been blurred as social sites have added networking functionality, networking sites have added media functionality, and marketing is being done on all of these sites. In the interest of simplicity, I will refer to all such venues as "social networking sites" in this article.

In my article "Take Control of Your Career!" (*Intercom*, July/August 2009), I mentioned there are nearly limitless actions you can take to increase your sphere of influence and your job security. Social networking is a prime example. Let's look at some opportunities and lessons to be learned.

Follow Your Audience

In the early days of the Internet, companies realized they *had* to create a presence on the World Wide Web because that's where customers were looking for information. The exact same phenomenon now exists with social networking sites.

Nielsen reported that people spent almost 14 *billion* minutes on Facebook in April 2009 alone. At the time of this writing, Alexa.com reported that 32.46 percent of *global* Internet users visited Facebook.com the previous day. Participation in social networking sites is clearly not just a passing fad but an enduring new method of communication.

Why should your company have a Facebook presence? *Because that's where your audience is.*

Our job is not to write user manuals and sales brochures. Our job is to get user-optimized content to people when they need it and where they want it. In other words, follow your audience.

Ask a Friend

Many website pages are static, meaning that all the reader can do is passively read them. Web 2.0 gave readers the ability to *interact*, first enabling them to comment on what was published, then eventually uploading content of their own.

People often ask coworkers or friends about local restaurants, movies, and so forth, but such recommendations are limited by the number of friends and coworkers they have. Web 2.0 changed that, enabling people to get recommendations from anyone.

Scott Abel (*TheContentWrangler.com*) describes Web 2.0 this way:

> Communication used to be restricted to geography— you would see something on the bulletin board at your local coffee house and mention it to a friend next door or in the next cubicle at work. Social

networks remove the geographic restriction. Now I share information with friends and acquaintances across the street and across the globe. Facebook is one big worldwide coffee shop!

The lesson: Give your audience the opportunity to interact. Enable them to give feedback, offer suggestions, and share tips and tricks. They are going to talk about your product anyway, so give them a forum where you can at least monitor the traffic and respond to customer concerns. This applies to your documentation and the products that you document. (More on this in a bit.)

Show and Tell

It used to be that only TV networks and cable companies could distribute video. Now anyone with a video camera and a YouTube account is a video producer!

Usability testing has shown that a growing percentage of customers would rather *watch* how to do something than read how to do something. So why are you forcing your customer to read a manual? Create how-to animations, how-to videos, free introductory web seminars, and so forth, and post them on YouTube and your company's website. Use them to not only instruct current customers but to also develop *new* customers.

The lesson: Deliver user assistance not just where and when customers want it, deliver it in the format in which they want it.

Claiming Your Sphere of Influence

Steve Rosenbaum recently blogged on FastCompany.com about the growing importance of having a content strategy. Companies are finally understanding that customers are not visiting company websites for flash, they visit for substance. It's not about the tools, it's about the content, and customers want content germane to them. "All of us," Rosenbaum wrote, "it now appears, are in the content business."

So if all companies are in the content business, why aren't you—the professional content developer—taking charge of your company's content strategy? Are you waiting for someone to ask you to help, or are you jumping up and down in front of your company's CIO saying, "Hey! This is my domain! I should be driving this initiative!"

We as a profession must apply passion and assertiveness in carving out and claiming our sphere of influence.

Taking the Initiative

My favorite story about an employee taking the initiative and expanding his sphere of influence is Frank Eliason, a customer service agent from Comcast Cable. Rather than waiting for customers to call him to complain (or worse, simply switching to another carrier without calling), Frank searched for negative comments about his company on Twitter, proactively reached out to the customers, and offered to help. From Businessweek.com:

I think it's safe to call Comcast's Frank Eliason the most famous customer service manager in the U.S., possibly in the world. Ten months ago, Eliason, whose official title is [now] Director of Digital Care, came up with the idea of using Twitter to interact with customers of Comcast, for whom he has worked for a year and a half.

Eliason discovered that by doing a search for the word "Comcast" (and occasionally "Comcrap"), he could find tweeters who just happened to mention service complaints he could address. In December 2008, he celebrated the handling of his 22,000th tweet.

As of the time I wrote this article, he had more than 42,000 followers.

What customer problem can *you* solve today?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Many companies block access to social networking sites out of fear their employees will waste hours on the job playing games, chatting with friends, and so forth. Yet other companies (realizing that the more often a company is mentioned online the higher it will be ranked in search engines) require their employees to go online and mention their company several times a day.

Another aspect of social media is that Google and Bing are beginning to rank Twitter hits above website hits (based on the assumption that what people are tweeting about now is more

relevant than content that was published days, weeks, or months ago).

So many companies are employing SEO techniques that it is often difficult to get your site near the top of the search engines. Posting relevant content to Twitter and other real-time communication networks may be the thing to get you or your company higher in the search results. From WebProNews.com:

> Google and Microsoft almost simultaneously announced deals with Twitter a few months back, that would give the companies access to tweets in real-time to fuel their respective search engines' real-time results.
>
> After the Twitter deals were announced, Bing came out and said, "If someone has a lot of followers, his/her Tweet may get ranked higher. If a tweet is exactly the same as other Tweets, it will get ranked lower."
>
> Google was not as vocal about how it would rank tweets and other real-time results, but the company has now shed a bit of light on that via an interview with MIT's *Technology Review*. David Talbot interviewed Google "Fellow" Amit Singhal, who has led development of real-time search at the company. According to him, Google also ranks tweets by followers to an extent, but it's not just about how many followers you get. It's about how reputable those followers are.

Blog, Blog, Blog

Since real-time networking sites limit the length of each message sent (the Twitter limit is 140 characters), many people include just a few words about a topic plus a website link for more information. For example, I recently retweeted an article Chellie Campbell posted about how to set your bill rate:

> **JackMolisani** Are you happy with your bill rate? Well, who picked that number? RT @ChellieCampbell http://www.chellie.com/newsletter

The problem with tweets such as this is that they drive traffic to Chellie's website, not mine. I have to have content on my site to which I can refer people if I want to use Twitter as a business development tool, so I converted my old static website to a Web 2.0–based website. Now I am blogging and using Twitter to drive traffic to my site:

> **JackMolisani** New blog post: How successful do YOU want to be? http://prospringstaffing.com/category/blog/

You don't have to own your own company or be a consultant to tweet or have a blog. Just find something interesting your department or employer is doing and get the word out!

WIIFM?

Up to this point, I have been writing about how you can leverage social networking to help your company. Now let's address what's in it for you, the individual.

When Scott Abel shared his worldwide coffee shop analogy with me, he used this example: A friend of his posted one day, "I wish I could get a job in Palm Springs." A few days later, a different friend posted that his company had an opening in their Palm Springs office, so he introduced them.

A similar networking opportunity was presented to me. A friend of mine mentioned he was demolishing and re-landscaping his entire backyard. Another friend of mine does incredible work with decorative concrete (*Abstract-ConcreteNoLa.com*). Both of them were "friends" of mine on Facebook but not friends with each other, so I introduced them. They have already started exchanging information about the project.

I love facilitating such introductions, as my second friend didn't have to spend hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars in advertising to find that lead. And my first friend receives the added benefit of getting my personal recommendation that the concrete vendor does superior work (vs. receiving a bid from a total stranger). This is a great example of online coffee shop word-of-mouth, as my first friend lives in Orlando, Florida, and the second in New Orleans, Louisiana!

I don't have statistics to back this up, but I wouldn't doubt if more job openings are filled through personal referrals than by posting the jobs to online job sites. In fact, I believe that many positions are filled by employee referrals long before they need to be advertised and, thus, are never even posted online.

How many career opportunities are you missing because you are not networking with friends and industry peers? It takes time to build a quality network of friends and business acquaintances. Start developing your personal and professional networks before your company downsizes your job or decides to offshore your entire department.

Developing Your Online Brand

In her presentation at The LavaCon Conference on how to create an online brand, content strategist Rahel Bailie (*IntentionalDesign.ca*) said, "Your online brand shouldn't happen by accident."

I am a firm believer that if you are a professional in your field, you should have an "Internet footprint" that gives evidence of what you have done. Write articles for your STC chapter newsletter or website, speak at conferences, post an online portfolio with client letters of recommendation or success stories—anything that will help show you are a professional in your field when companies search for information about you.

The other day I did an Internet search for the name of a candidate (a senior technical writer with more than 10 years' experience) and found zero hits on her name.

I thought to myself, "How can anyone who is truly professional in his/her field have *no* Internet footprint?"

Just as you should build your professional networks before you need them, you should take time to build your Internet footprint before you need it.

A Double-Edged Sword

Perhaps I should be more specific and say develop a *positive* Internet footprint before you need it. The upside to the Internet is the ease with which people can find information. The downside is that anything you say (or that is said about you) is recorded on the Internet forever.

Companies will often do an online search for information about you before they offer you a job (just as I did with

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that senior technical writer), so be careful what you post online. I once saw a bumper sticker that said, "Never do anything you wouldn't want to explain to the paramedics." A similar rule of thumb would be, "Never post anything on the Internet you wouldn't want your employer or grandmother to see."

For example, a friend of mine who I knew to be actively interviewing for a job posted on Twitter that 1) she was sick and 2) she going home to open a bottle of wine. While her intent was just to share with her "peeps" what she was doing that evening, a potential employer could look at those same words and think, "Hmm, she is sickly and uses alcohol to cope with stress. Let's go with the other candidate we liked." (I advised her to delete those tweets, which she did.)

A more egregious example was the job seeker who, after receiving a job offer, posted the following on Twitter: "Cisco just offered me a job! Now I have to weigh the utility of a fatty paycheck against the daily commute to San Jose

and hating the work." Someone from Cisco saw the post and the job offer was promptly withdrawn.

The lesson: Have an online branding strategy and think twice before posting critical or personal information about yourself on the Internet!

So Is Social Networking Right for You?

In a word, yes! You don't have to be an independent contractor or consultant to take advantage of social networking. You do, however, have to take an active interest in changing business markets and how your company should respond to those changes. In fact, I would say our survival as a profession depends on it.

Rahel Bailie summarized this point beautifully when she said, "If you don't think outside the box, you will be STUCK in the box until the end of your career. Or until you are laid off. Whichever comes first."

You Are the Master of Your Career

Are you grabbing the reins of your career and steering it where you want it to go, or are you just sitting in the saddle wondering where the horse is going? Or worse, sitting in the saddle backward looking at where you've been, not where you're going?

Have you offered to create a Facebook presence for your company? A user forum? Are you searching for what people are saying about your company to see if there is anything you can do to retain that customer? Are you creating how-to videos to improve the user experience and attract new customers? What else can you do to improve your department, your company, your career?

The possibilities are endless! ℹ️

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