



Linking In

How you can take advantage of the largest business networking site.

BY DON KRESKI

LinkedIn can be a good way to expand your business network, but it is important to understand that the site works in a subtle, indirect way. The site is more about networking than direct sales opportunities.

“It’s interesting,” an old friend and AV marketing manager recently said to me, “several of our manufacturers have told us what amazing success their dealers all over the country are having with social networking sites like LinkedIn and Facebook. I struggle with that claim because I haven’t spoken with any dealers who are having amazing success.”

The comment struck a chord. I too have been trying to figure out how I can use LinkedIn and perhaps the other networking sites to bring new business to myself and my clients.

My friend, Tony Cascio, director of business development at St. Charles, Ill.-based integrator MediaTech Intelligent Home Systems, says he has done many of the things that I’ve done. He set up a personal profile. He’s reached out and connected to a number of friends and business contacts. He’s joined some groups and discussions. Recently, he set up a LinkedIn group for his company, and he’s talking to people he knows and asking them how they’re using the site.

What Cascio has learned is that you can, indeed, use LinkedIn to grow your client base, but the way it works is subtle. Daniel Newman, executive vice president at United Visual of Itasca, Ill., puts it nicely: “It’s the old adage of not what you know but who you know. We all tend to have very broad networks of people we’ve met throughout our careers, but we don’t maximize the potential of those networks. It’s not that there’s necessarily a lot of reciprocal business coming from these contacts, but when we need something, we usually know someone who can help.

“For example,” Newman says, “when I need qualified candidates for a position

I'm trying to fill, when I'm looking for a new supplier or for an introduction to a potential customer, if I know someone who might help, I'll give that person a call." LinkedIn facilitates that kind of networking. It's not so much a direct sales or marketing opportunity, but a powerful indirect one.

A RESEARCH TOOL

Newman says one of the biggest values of LinkedIn is its ability to help reach decision makers within new accounts. "Think about how hard it might be to find an IT director at a large corporation that you want to do business with. In the past, you would cold call that company, probably talk to a secretary, and hope she's willing to tell you who the IT manager is. But now I can go to LinkedIn, very often find the person I'm looking for, and then connect to him directly through a group that we both belong to or ask a mutual connection to introduce me. At the very least, I can send his profile to someone on my team and say, 'You should get in touch with this person.'"

One of LinkedIn's best features is the ability to form or join discussion groups on almost any topic.

Betsy Jaffe, director of public relations for InfoComm International, has joined several groups built around specific publications, such as one for the readers of *Architect* magazine, as well as PR and association-related groups. "I tend to join these groups because I want to see what their members are talking about," she says. "I may also join a group if I'm looking for a vendor in a particular area because I can ask for advice and 'listen in' on discussions."

Many people use LinkedIn as a huge contacts database. For that reason, recruiter Dan Brockman says he generally keeps LinkedIn open on his desktop. "When someone calls me," he says, "I may not recognize the name, but in a couple of minutes I can usually find out who it is I'm talking to and what their potential interest might be in talking to me."

A RECRUITING TOOL

It should be no surprise that LinkedIn is widely used for career networking. Brockman says people are hungry to stay in touch. "I think it's because there's so little business in some areas and so many people unemployed," he says. "This is one way to stay alive, to keep your contacts going."

For that reason, Newman says the site has been extremely useful in recruiting engineers, installers, and sales people. "I recently updated my status, simply said 'seeking account executives and design engineers, send your resumes' and I got at least half-dozen inquiries from competitors, suppliers, people looking to do something different," he says. "And I can say that people introduced through LinkedIn end up being much more qualified than anything I've gotten from an ad on Monster."

USING LINKEDIN AS A PROMOTIONAL TOOL

If you want to use LinkedIn to promote your business, there are several options.

There is an email section, or "inmail," that you can use (if you buy a premium membership) to send email to any site member. You do run the risk of getting your mes-

sage treated as spam, but unsolicited email is not really what the site is about.

You can post news in the groups you join and those news items can certainly promote your company or the products you sell. They can also link back to your website or blog. You are much more likely to be read if your news includes helpful information that group members need rather than obvious promotional material. Tim Grant of lunavista communications, whom I partner with for search engine marketing, posts articles from his newsletter offering tips on how to increase search engine rankings.

In the “More” menu, there is an “Answers” section, which lets people ask questions, post answers, or search for posted information on any subject. Shana Rieger, social media manager for InfoComm, says that posting answers in this section can be a way to help establish your expertise.

GETTING STARTED

If you are not a member, begin with the “Join LinkedIn” box on the home page. If you have joined but want to do more with your membership, there is an extensive Learning Center under the “More” menu.


Typically you’ll set up a profile for yourself with your current and past positions; upload a starting contacts list from Outlook, Act, or your online email software; and begin to reach out to people. The site walks you through the whole process.

Brockman suggests following all the steps the setup menus recommend. “It may seem silly to upload your picture, but it really is very useful,” he says. “When I speak to someone I’ve never met, it can be hard to get an appreciation of who that person might be. With a photo, I at least feel like I know him a little more.” Brockman also suggests gathering a few recommendations from your business contacts.

You’ll want to start joining some groups. These are on the “Groups Directory” page under the Groups menu. Consider joining industry-related groups, alumni groups from your schools and previous employers, and professional groups.

Once you’ve been accepted into a group, you can start reading discussions, posting questions and comments, and posting news about yourself and your company. Groups give you a forum for asking technical questions, learning about potential suppliers, and connecting to people you may have lost touch with.

Grant says that starting a company page with links to your regular website may improve your search engine rankings. It also offers an easy way to post information about your company without updating your company website.

If you become a regular LinkedIn user, you may be surprised at the power of the site. “Right now I have 377 direct connections,” Newman says, “126,000 secondary connections—that is, friends of friends—and I’m within three degrees of over 5.5 million people.” 

Don Kreski is the president of Kreski Marketing Consultants. Contact him at www.kreski.com/contact.html.

 **svconline.com**

Read Don Kreski’s other marketing columns at svconline.com/marketmix.