

Comparison of Popular Social Networking Tools for Professionals

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Abstract

In this paper three of the most popular social networking Web sites, Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace, will be compared and contrasted. Their potential usefulness by various professional people (including you) will be discussed.

Introduction

Introduction: a VERY Brief History of Social Networking

Social networking – the use of the Internet to enable individuals to find others with common interests and allow them to “meet” online – has been around about as long as the Internet itself. It has taken various forms – some of the more popular in the 1980s include bulletin board services, such as FidoNet, and the rise of the popular online services, e.g. CompuServe, Prodigy, and AOL, each of which developed forums in which their members could reach one another.

No history of social networking is complete if it doesn't talk about Usenet, which of course predates the Web by about 20 years, and therefore predates blogs and social networking Web sites. There are a number of places where you can find out about social networking Web sites, each having the problem of rating the various sites by importance or subscription rates, which change quickly. For these reasons, here I treat social networking principles – based on Usenet, blogs, etc. – instead of history.

Usenet consists of tens of thousands of bulletin boards (“newsgroups”) organized by special interest, and to some extent organized into broad families. With so many newsgroups, it was possible for you to find several of interest to you with very little effort. Many newsgroups had developed FAQs – which in general still endure today – and rules of courtesy (“netiquette”) were generally followed throughout all of Usenet. Though Usenet still exists (most find it at groups.google.com), it is far less useful than it was at the height of its popularity in the early 1990s. Of course this is mainly due to the development of the World Wide Web, which exploded in the mid-1990s and which boasted a much easier user interface than the text-based access Internet users had known before.

The simpler, richer access afforded by the Web also encouraged a great increase in spam throughout Usenet, as the Internet in general opened up to more business users large and small, and these users sought ways to sell their

goods and services either alongside or without Web sites that others would actually have to choose to visit. Spam, thought for years as “noise” throughout Usenet, drove thousands of netiquette-observing contributors away, and leaving them with very incomplete options for online discussions or Q&A.

The early days of the Web were for the most part one-way communication: individuals, companies and agencies would put information up there, and others would read it and respond if they chose. A strong desire of users to communicate the other way led to the formation of message boards, chat rooms, and (eventually) blogs. None of these methods would gather large numbers of users with common interests, though by the early 2000s some blogs began to attract a great deal of attention. Even those blogs still were not true multi-way communication, and the explosion in social networks that we see today shows that multi-way communication was strongly desired even by people who didn't know before that they wanted it.

There are many, many social networks – enough that it's getting hard for start-ups to raise funding to start new ones. (This is a phenomenon we saw in the late 1990s just before the dot-com bust, and it may be a sign that some social networks will either die out or merge into other ones.) But those in place today each have a character all their own. I am concentrating on three of the popular ones – Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace – simply because there aren't enough hours in the day to join many others. I have a user profile on each of these three, and have made observations of my own, but also polled dozens of other users to get different points of view.

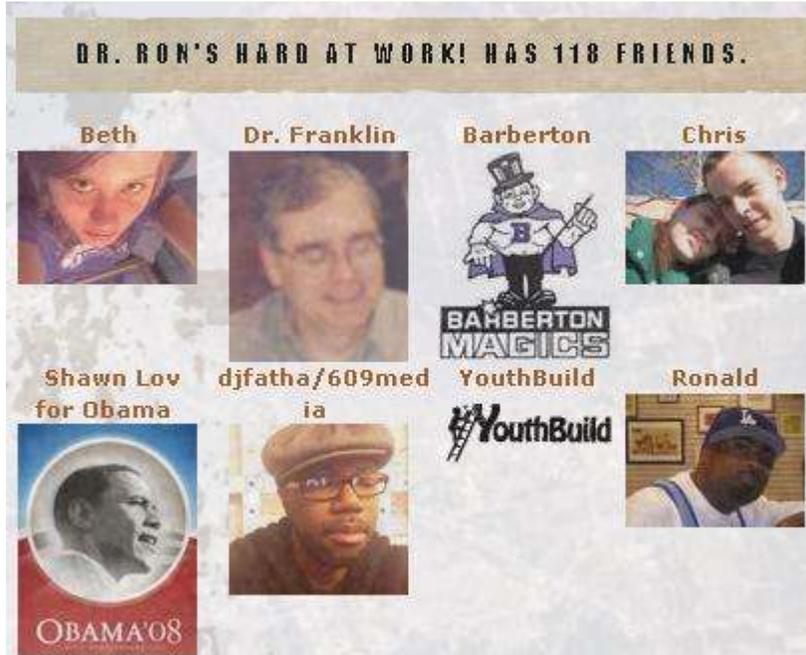
The three sites I examine have the following in common:

- They're each free, though they also offer various paid services. They make their money in other ways.
- They each offer a large (and growing) customer base. (That customer base is largely different for each, so the numbers will also be different.)
- They each offer some flexibility in what you allow to appear in your user profile – and who gets to see it.
- Their principal brand outreach method is “permission marketing.”

The measurement factors I use are:

- Ease of use: do they actually promote communication?
- Relevance of friends: can you reach your target audience?
- Strength of search: can you find people?
- Text and multimedia elements: are you happy with the layout?
- WOULD YOU USE IT?
- User comments

MySpace



Your MySpace profile includes a summary of your “top friends” – supposedly the ones you care about the most (my top eight friends are pictured here). This is the chief means others who visit your profile have for making friends of YOUR friends.

As is typical of social networking sites, if you request friend status with someone else, that person

must approve you as a connection before the connection happens. In MySpace, the approval process is important, because within MySpace, perhaps more than in any other social networking site, people you’ve never heard of or seen before will contact you. You’d like to think they contact you because of something they have in common with you – but that is not always the case.

Though the majority of people with MySpace profiles are NOT teenagers, there are probably more teenagers using MySpace than any other social networking site. This results in the following:

- Parents who worry about who’s contacting their kids.
- Teens who think they understand the Internet because they can message with their friends; who think they understand Web design because they can “pimp my profile”; who think computers in general serve no other purpose than to enable the contact they have.
- Profiles that resemble – according to one user I interviewed – bad Geocities pages of the mid-1990s.
- Professionals unwilling to use MySpace as a tool for conducting business – though some will use it to follow their favorite musicians.

These ideas are why MySpace is generally blocked by computer administrators at most schools and many businesses.

MySpace is, however, good for some businesses: generally, those that cater to a base of “fans.” Event-driven entrepreneurs such as comedians, musicians, independent filmmakers, and pro wrestlers are flocking to MySpace in large

numbers. One wrestler told me that his promotion will never have a hosted Web site again. “Why should I? MySpace is free, and it’s better for reaching the fans!” Some business people prefer MySpace because it has a good interface for visual imagery – though most profiles don’t take full advantage of this. These people tend to have visual businesses, like Web or graphic design and t-shirts. Event-driven and visual businesses will find a much greater flexibility in profile design than private individuals.

In all these cases, your marketing depends on having a very large number of friends, and on having your profile completely dedicated to marketing (in such a way as to convince your friends to visit it frequently).

The Internet has always created underground celebrities – those people who are insanely popular within the online context and (at least for a while) largely unknown outside that context. MySpace has created a legion of such celebrities, such as Metal Sanaz (pictured right), host of MySpace online concerts. These celebrities, competing with those above ground for the same listening audience, reinforce a new type of brand loyalty – MySpace is making them into brands.



Consider what was going on above ground in 2005:

- Movie box office receipts were down seven percent
- Newspaper sales were down three percent
- Magazine newsstand sales were at their lowest point since the 1960s

In the midst of this, Rupert Murdoch bought MySpace for \$580M. During 2005, social networking sites combined to reach 45 percent of all active Web users, and MySpace grew 367 percent. Like it or not, the business potential of MySpace is not to be ignored.

My criticisms of MySpace are as follows:

- Its search capability is nearly useless. You can only search for a name as a caption for a profile picture, and very few MySpace users have their actual name as a caption.
- Though it offers great flexibility in page design, this is not always a good thing, unless you know what you are doing: IF you know something about style sheets, and IF you are willing to get along without JavaScript. There are numerous Web sites offering free profile templates, but many of those just aren’t suitable for conducting business.
- Though it offers multiple ways to communicate between users (blog, bulletin, private messages), those forms of communication are still passive. Users must visit them for them to have business value.
- It offers a high level of spam, often in the form of profiles sent as messages and designed to draw users to porn sites. (Though its spam level is admittedly much less than you get in your e-mail box today.)

Facebook

The history of Facebook is amply recorded elsewhere. What I want to concentrate on here is its original intent: college students. Originally created by Mark Zuckerberg as a network to link students at Harvard, it has spread to the point where nearly every college and university in the USA has a Facebook network. Its growth is reflected in its corporate market value of nearly \$1 billion. That Facebook is of principal interest to college students and recent grads is reflected in its layout, in its various types of communications, and in its plug-ins.



[View Photos of Joanna \(3\)](#)

[View Joanna's Friends \(38\)](#)

[Send Joanna a Gift](#)

[Send Joanna a Free Gift](#)

[Send Joanna a Message](#)

[Poke Her!](#)



Facebook's principal means of making money is banner ads, which is amazing because very few Internet start-ups today can raise funding if their business model depends heavily on banner ads – an indication that they are not trusted as a revenue stream. But Facebook also makes money through the sale of \$1 virtual “gifts,” essentially images sent as greeting cards with personal notes from one user to another.

You can also “poke” other users, again by sending along an image like these seen on the left, along with a personal note.

And, each user has a “wall,” on which their friends can post brief messages. Facebook, as does MySpace, offers several means for users to communicate with their friends.

Joining a network is almost painless on Facebook. If your profile says you attended a certain school, you will be given a clickable link to join the network for that school. No searching involved.

Joining a network is also probably the easiest way to locate users to connect to as friends, though Facebook's search capability is limited:

- You can't see ALL the members of a particular network, if that network has more than 500 members.
- When you browse the members of a network, some members show up repeatedly, two, three, and even four times.

If you want to do business on Facebook, you must want college students and recent grads to be your target audience – the high-school age audience is growing and many professionals appreciate its clean layout, but they are the

minority. This makes Facebook the ideal platform for those who are doing recruiting: hiring managers, agencies, contractors, consultants, and the military. (I have not seen them there in large numbers, but I haven't had a profile there long. I fully expect to see them.) Also advertising there are airlines and college savings plans.

Your business method will probably include designing plug-ins, which Facebook uses heavily, or perhaps customizing those already created. Plug-in applications include games and surveys, and the best ones spread throughout the site as great examples of viral marketing. If you can design a viral survey, or can post a viral video for an audience between 18 and 25 years old, you can be very successful there.

There is also the powerful technique of creating "social ads." Marketing on Facebook can be made VERY tightly targeted through a multi-keyword search capability unmatched by MySpace. Combine that with Google-esque Pay Per Click (PPC) capability and you can have very good returns on a marketing investment.

My criticisms of Facebook include:

- Plug-ins – games and so forth – lead to numerous invitations from friends. If you have many friends, you can expect many such invitations. You will soon find there aren't enough hours in the day to follow-up on that, and that many of the games don't interest you.
- Though some users have had success hacking their Facebook profiles, the layout is in general locked. It's clean, but its attention-grabbers are confined to little images in pokes and gifts.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a networking site designed for professionals. As a result, there are few members under age 23 or 24. Many members have been in the workforce for years; most are very well-educated.



The screenshot shows a LinkedIn profile for Ron Graham. The profile includes a name with a "you" icon, a bio: "LION; Engineer, Educator, Editor of 'Rhetoric for Engineers' and 'start me up!'; advisor to student entrepreneurs", and a location: "Greater New York City Area". There is a profile picture of a person in a space helmet. Below the bio, there is a post: "Ron Graham has students on Spring Break... but HE'S not." with a timestamp of "1 day ago". At the bottom of the profile, there are navigation tabs: "Profile", "Q&A", "Recommendations", and "Connections".

There are five principal ways to add contacts in LinkedIn, and these are a bit different from

MySpace or Facebook, because your contacts form a network, and LinkedIn does not allow you to make direct contact with someone not in your network.

- Current**
- Computer Literacy Teacher at Isles YouthBuild Institute
 - Tutor at Club Z Tutoring of Mid-Jersey (Sole Proprietorship)

- Upload a contact list from Outlook, and LinkedIn will search to see if your Outlook contacts have profiles.
- Search for others who went to your school at the same time you did, or who worked at a company where you worked.
- Join groups – as the other social networks do, LinkedIn allows you to form and join common-interest groups.
- Ask and answer questions – Q&A is public, and many users will form relationships with you based on questions and answers.
- Become a LinkedIn Open Networker (LION), or make contact with LIONS. These folks will add anyone who asks to their networks, and they can be helpful in developing yours.

Unlike MySpace and Facebook, LinkedIn is not visually-driven at all. You are allowed one photo in your profile – that’s it. No photo albums, etc. Many users direct others to personal Web sites (and even MySpace or Facebook profiles) if they want to share more images with one another.

Q&A is in its design reminiscent of what Usenet used to be before it was flooded by spam. Most LinkedIn users are genuinely helpful, perhaps mindful of the gains to their professional reputations from helping others.

Alexa Passos Ronngren
Global Guerrilla Marketing Coach & Consultant
see all my answers

Best Answers in: Business Development (1)... see more

Hi Ron. I know you wanted to hear from people actually using these tools, but I enter this conversation with gifts! I'm not sure if this will help, but one of my favorite sites about marketing has been abuzz with articles about Facebook and MySpace. Check out the links below to Marketing Profs articles. They have many more articles and even a webinar or two on the subject, but they will only give you a peek at premium content unless you're a member.

Links:
<http://www.marketingprofs.com/7/facebook-what-web-marketers-should-know-ow...>
<http://www.marketingprofs.com/6/spencer29.asp>
<http://www.marketingprofs.com/7/myspace-marketing-tips-bodley.asp>

Messages from Alexa Passos Ronngren (2):
 RE: Seeking your opinions on MySpace and Facebook
 RE: Seeking your opinions on MySpace and Facebook

posted 10 days ago | [Reply to Alexa Passos Ronngren](#) | [Flag answer as...](#)

You can add to your professional reputation by receiving a “Best Answer” credit for answering questions. Best Answers are defined as “expertise” by LinkedIn, and as you gain expertise, you gain trust from other members – and perhaps you gain new contacts as well.

My criticisms of LinkedIn are these:

- There is no support for groups at all. The group search capability was brought to its knees months ago by the growing number of new groups; groups that have no business relevance are approved daily with a rubber stamp; if groups are to have the ability to have discussions or have their members communicate with one another, they must create that ability.

- Group administrators in general approve anyone who requests membership. This leads to a large number of members collecting group logos on their profiles like postage stamps.
- There are no FAQs. The same questions are asked over and over: “how do I delete a LinkedIn profile?” “how do I merge two profiles?” “how do I remove a contact?” “how do I join groups?” and so on.

Final Notes

Social networking brings with it some cautions:

- Don’t post anything you don’t want to be famous for. That includes silly or offensive images, offhand remarks that can be misinterpreted, etc.
- Remember that potential employers and clients can and will look at what you have put up there. They will judge you by photos and words. (That’s not to say you can’t be social. But you should be careful with any attitudes that might reflect poorly on an employer.)

Contributors

The following folks made significant contributions to this work through a Q&A session on LinkedIn: Mark Bao, Angela DiMeglio, Rob Dumouchel, Kristen Fife, Monica Flores, Sheri Taylor Gilchrist, Carroll Goggin, Jay Goldbach, Harry Hallman, Jay Hammond, Mike Hanks, Keith Hanks, Michael Huntsman, Jennifer Johnson, Chris Kent, Kristina Libby, Richard Michie, Nichelle Pace, Wendy Parsley, Miccilina Piraino, Alexa Passos Ronngren, Ashley Schoenknecht, Cesar Senatore, Ingrid Spangler, Amanda Strange.

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