

Online social networking: How to make friends fast

Want to develop hundreds of potentially valuable professional contacts in a matter of days? Read on.

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Next time you meet someone at a clinical conference, don't just hand that person a business card.

Instead, invite the colleague to join your online social network. Within days, your new acquaintance will have access to hundreds of potential business contacts—an ever-expanding network that otherwise would have taken years to build.

HOW ONLINE NETWORKS WORK

In the Internet age, people connect by meeting online in chat forums devoted to a favorite subject, exchanging e-mails after reading a mailing list or Web log, or finding relevant Web sites.

Online social networking takes this interaction one step further: Users join social networks and then invite others to join, allowing people to meet friends of friends for business or pleasure.

With popular file-sharing networks such as Kazaa and Napster, strangers can share music and other computer files. Online social networking sites work differently, but the idea is the same: to share resources.

For social purposes, these sites let users see lists of other peoples' contacts, providing an opportunity to make new friends based on common interests. For business, interaction may be done directly by reviewing a profile or indirectly via a chain of mutual contacts in a network. As others on the network keep inviting new members and opening paths to new contact lists, your social and/or professional network will continuously grow.

HOW ONLINE NETWORKING CAN HELP YOU

Developing contacts at clinical conferences is crucial to our livelihood, but too often business cards are lost or the contact's context is forgotten.

By contrast, with online social networking, contacts are developed and stay online. What's more, the contact's profile information enhances the context.

This service not only cements existing connections but may open the door to new, more worthwhile contacts. For example, the network may provide:

- a mechanism to discreetly market your services and seek job openings.
- a source of referrals for your patients who are moving to areas where you know few or no physicians. Each contact can check his or her network for area doctors. This could also lead to more patients for a doctor in that area.

Online social networking also can promote an exchange of ideas and expertise. Many large companies use this technology to solicit strategic planning ideas from their workforces. This saves companies the expense of an outside consultant.¹

HOW TO GET STARTED

Most social networking sites provide free accounts, using a valid e-mail address as the primary method of contact ([Table](#)).

Once you activate your account, you should set up a profile that highlights your interests, specialties, and types of offers you wish to receive. You are now ready to invite friends to join your network. From there, you can find other members with common interests (eg, colleagues in medical practice).

Most sites let you determine which information to make public or private, such as your e-mail address or phone number. Sites such as [LinkedIn](#) give you additional control by blocking communications from sources other than your trusted connections; you can also elect to anonymously decline requests for contact.

Some sites offer premium accounts, which for \$5 to \$10 a month offer services such as resume management, advanced searches, and information on who has reviewed your profile.

RISKS

Some networking sites are not secure.² This may open your social network to spam, or another user might be able to change your information. To prevent this, only use social network providers who implement SSL-level security.

Level of trust from network to network is another issue. For example, if you do not trust one colleague's opinion, that person's network may be not worth keeping. You may wish to keep the contact anyway because some knowledge-good or bad-may be better than no information at all.

Table
Online Networking Sites

Site	URL
Business-oriented sites	
INWYK	www.itsnotwhatyouknow.com
LinkedIn	www.linkedin.com
Ryze	www.ryze.com
Spoke	www.spoke.com
Socially oriented sites	
Evite	www.evite.com
Friendster	www.friendster.com
Huminity	www.huminity.com
Myspace	www.myspace.com
Ringo	www.ringo.com
Tickle	www.emode.com

Related Resources

www.ringo.com. Click on "take a tour" for a quick tutorial on online social networking.

If you have questions about these products or comments about Psyber Psychiatry, [click here](#) to contact Dr. Luo or send an e-mail to: Current.Psychiatry@dowdenhealth.com.

Disclosure

Dr. Luo reports no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article. The opinions expressed by Dr. Luo in this column are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of CURRENT PSYCHIATRY.

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