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# LinkedIn: Social networking for professionals

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**B**usiness developers—owners, salespeople, etc.—want to be wherever their clients and prospects are. Traditionally, this has meant meeting over a meal, socializing at sports or charity events, or regularly attending industry conferences and workshops. Increasingly, however, clients and prospects are spending more and more time online. This means social networking and online professional networks have become powerful tools for business owners and salespeople who want to take their networking efforts to the next level.

A social media network is an association or group that develops relationships between people so they can share information and expertise using the Internet. Online communities emerge from these and are often by invitation only, making them safe places for members to share information, ask questions and suggest answers on a common theme, subject or issue.

Social networks give businesspeople access to other professionals they might otherwise not have the opportunity to meet. Connections may be localized, with a focus on networkers' cities or current companies, but they can also be much broader, linking prospective contacts in larger regions, including international communities. The potential for connecting and building relationships in social networks with hundreds of individuals with shared business interests and experience is very real.

The largest and most powerful business-focused social network is currently LinkedIn. It was launched in May 2003 as a professional networking resource to help members nurture relationships and keep in touch with contacts.

As of June, LinkedIn had over 70 million members in 200 countries on all seven continents. LinkedIn's focus as a professional social network, and the support it has gained in global business communities, distinguishes it from other popular social networking sites.

LinkedIn is a free online service, highly credible and accessible. It is an extremely powerful tool for connecting, reconnecting and building relationships. If someone is searching for you, or someone with your capabilities—design expertise, a certain type of flooring installation and so on—your LinkedIn profile will be featured near the top

of their search results.

The major advantages to using LinkedIn are setting up and maintaining a profile, and linking to and adding connections to other professionals.

Here are key initial steps to leverage relationships successfully on LinkedIn:

Go to [linkedin.com](http://linkedin.com) and establish a profile as completely as possible: photo, website link, employment history, education and detailed description of expertise.

To jump start an entry, consider cutting and pasting a current resume into your LinkedIn profile. LinkedIn ranks a profile's completeness by rating it out of 100% and will display what information is needed to complete your profile.

LinkedIn feeds off peoples' business and education connections. The more complete the profile, the more connection points there are and opportunities to be had to contact or be contacted by other members. Highlight capabilities and specialized expertise that may be uncommon or particularly desirable.

A current profile will always provide business opportunities.

Making contacts and building relationships are driving forces behind LinkedIn. That's why active members don't just make and accept invitations, they ask to be introduced to their contacts' connections.

Who to invite? How many contacts? Some people download their electronic contact lists from Outlook and Gmail into LinkedIn, and link to all who are on the network. Others look for current and past colleagues, college and university friends, family friends and acquaintances.

As the key benefits of LinkedIn include building professional relationships, developing relationships online and following contacts' activities, it is important to keep contact numbers manageable. Think in terms of one or two hundred contacts as opposed to 500 or more.

It is prudent to be selective when inviting contacts and responding to invitations; it is not necessary to link to every person who sends an invitation or every person you know who has a LinkedIn profile. Be selective and gauge the usefulness of each contact and the value of being linked.

Contacts' connections should be reviewed regularly for potential introductions. Contacts are only as valuable as the connections they provide. If a person no longer holds value, un-link the contact.

When treated as a business development investment, LinkedIn provides good returns. Consider these strategic tips for increased benefits and opportunities:

- Visit your LinkedIn home page at least once a day. Each member is provided with a personal home page that highlights the member's LinkedIn activities, and those of all active contacts. This is where having a manageable number of contacts is effective.



- Get comfortable reading updates about your contacts and respond appropriately, such as congratulating someone on a promotion or providing a connection with a LinkedIn testimonial.

- Post updates on your profile. There is a feature on each profile where current news and insights can be shared in a limited space, similar to a "tweet." This information can be updated as frequently as desired. Remember, LinkedIn is a professional network, so maintain a business-like tone in all your communications. When used appropriately, this is a great development tool.

- Subject area groups. LinkedIn contains hundreds of subject-focused groups, which are invitation-only online communities. Groups provide another valuable touch point for professional networking. To get the most value out of group membership and participation, select wisely. Similar to contacts, group memberships can be un-linked.

- Questions and answers: There are over 20 topics from which to choose to post or answer posted questions. These features provide additional opportunities to grow networks and display expertise. Postings are very public and will turn up in Google search strategies. Participate actively but use judgment when posting or responding—remember to maintain a professional tone.

Social networks are very effective tools for building and sustaining relationships, especially for business. The ability to tap into larger and more diverse pools of current and potential customers and clients has never been more accessible.

Think of it this way: Not joining a social network like LinkedIn is akin to leaving money on the table.

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