

# The Four P's of Online Networking

A practical guide to getting maximum benefit from online networking.

By now, you've either been invited, have signed up or are passively or actively using an online networking site such as MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn or Plaxo. Like most of the population, you're wondering how to benefit out of spending time on these online tools beyond just finding old friends, messaging on walls, posting photos and occasionally poking people.

The main benefit of participating in online networking is that you can take advantage of access that is unavailable with traditional networking. Online networking tools include the networks themselves - webs of millions of people who are just a few clicks away from receiving an electronic message from anyone within the network - and the application to assist in maintaining those networks.

As an avid and active user of both LinkedIn (business) and Facebook (social) networking tools, I've developed a methodology to get the most out of online networking by following the Four P's of online networking: Purpose, Profile, Participation and Persistence. Here's a brief guide:

## **PURPOSE**

Before you sign-up, decide up front what you want to achieve, how you want to use these tools, and specifically set some goals. For me, it was about expanding my network by reconnecting with family, friends and former and current colleagues, introducing myself to people with interesting profiles around Australia and in other countries and identifying groups with shared interests. Once I'd establish my connections base, it was about sharing information, ideas and concepts.

To achieve this, I decided early on to be an Open Networker. This meant accepting invitations from other people who I didn't directly know but whose profiles were consistent with my shared interests.

It's been said that the internet is either a time saver or a time waster. Clearly understanding what you want to get out of it determines your focus and how much time you spend on online networking. Once you settle on two or three purposeful goals, it should not only be a productive exercise but fun to boot!

## **PROFILE**

The advantage of online networking is that it turns networking from the invisible to the visible. Once you sign up to an online network, you're well on the way to creating your own personal brand on the web. This is a unique opportunity to present yourself online by the one person who knows you best – you. By building and posting a compelling profile, you provide others with the ability to find you and attract other users who want to know you, potentially utilise your skills, sell you something you might value, just establish a connection or even offer you a job.

So take the time to develop a profile that best represents you, including a photo, your key achievements and your competencies. On business online networks such as LinkedIn where more than 10% of users are recruiters, your profile IS your online CV.

A word of warning - due to the nature of the medium, what goes on the web stays on the web. So don't post items that you wouldn't want the whole world to have access to or know about. A rule of thumb is to leave out the stuff you don't want your Mum to know about.

## **PARTICIPATION**

I regularly hear comments from users saying that they signed up initially, didn't get anything out of it - so they left. In my view, this is like going to a party, sitting in a corner all night and then complaining how bad the party was. Once you've got your profile up, be a participant - not a wallflower. The same social principles as a party apply - introduce yourself to others, start a conversation, share your thoughts, join a group discussion, ask questions or play a silly game. Do something that shows that you're actively involved in the network and that you want to be there.

In addition, choose to take an action regularly. For example, sites such as Facebook and Plaxo have reminders of when friends have birthdays coming up usually a few days before the event. I use this as an opportunity to keep in touch with my connections by sending a short note or messaging them with a birthday greeting. Although I may not correspond with some of my connections regularly, at the very least, I initiate contact once a year on their special day.

## **PERSISTENCE**

Get into the discipline of setting time aside – some, not at so much that it consumes – regularly to participate in network activities – and keep at it. There may be times when you don't get a timely response to an invitation, posting or some other message. My advice is to persist. Some people may not be at the same level of adoption as you are and are learning-and-using the tool at the same time. So be patient, stay on, don't give up and eventually it'll pay off.

I once invited a close personal connection to join my LinkedIn network. I worked with and spoke to this individual almost daily. Despite constant reminders to accept my invitation to connect, no response. Eventually, when he moved on to another role outside the company, he forgot about my invitation and invited me to join his network. It was 18 months after my original invitation but the constant reminders to connect eventually achieved the desired action. He is now the Australian CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

To get the most out of online networking, you need to work on it. Make the time to clearly articulate your purpose and goals, get into the discipline of refining and enhancing your profile, actively participate in network initiatives that support your goals and most of all – keep at it.

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