

# White Paper

## A Leap of Faith - Niche Social Networks



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The recent success of MySpace, Facebook, and Friendster has given rise to the heralding of social networks as the next great thing. The truth is that social networks have been used throughout human history, beginning with hunters banding together for survival.

As civilization flourished and physical “social networks” grew larger, more sophisticated communications were needed to maintain connectivity. More modern adaptations have included print books, magazines, radio, and television. Books went from mostly religious doctrine in the Middle Ages to a plethora of books on every conceivable subject today. Magazines went from a few general information publications in the early 20th century to thousands of different types of publications today. TV went from three networks in the mid-20th century to hundreds of channels today, catering to a large variety of desires from children’s programming to adult themes and everything in between.

### What Goes Around Comes Around

The same is happening with Web-based social networks. MySpace opened the door by allowing anyone to construct his or her own social network. Friendster created a site that allowed people to connect on a platonic or romantic level, and Facebook started as a site allowing college students to connect with one another. LinkedIn puts people in the business world together, and Youtube, a variation on the social network theme (user-generated content), allows people to share their video content. All are general information social network sites, and all have done well. Just as with the other historically important communication technologies, Internet-based social networks are moving from the big 4 to niche social networks.

Social sites that cater to specific lifestyles, hobbies, and professions are popping up all over the Web. These can be consumer sites or business-to-business networks, and they are not all just about finding a new job, friend, or lover. They are about business, and if you have a brand or want to establish a brand, owning and operating a niche social network might work for your company. In fact, the niche social network should be part of your company website.

By definition and by perception, a social network is a group of people with similar interests drawn together through interaction with each other for a mutually beneficial outcome. This means a social network site should provide valuable information and allow for member interaction. Companies operating social networks must be facilitators and members. Their goal is to keep the network lubricated while building their own (the brands’) value.

## **Branded Niche Social Networks**

Creating a niche social network for a company is a leap of faith. We have all been taught that volume is the most important aspect of a website. We believe the more people who visit the better. Actually, this is not true. The quality of the visitor is much more important. Thus, the first leap of faith we need to take is that volume is not necessary for success. People who join social networks are generally the people who are most vocal about their interests. They talk up products and services they love to friends, family, and acquaintances, and they will tell a company when they do not like something. Therefore, this core group will spread the word for a company like a perpetual “buzz” machine, and they will give better input regarding its product or service.

## **Speed Kills**

The second leap of faith is understanding that building a niche social network takes time. It is not a project, but rather a long-term part of company strategy. Many business managers want everything to work and work now, and because of that philosophy, they often waste large amounts of money on projects that do not work. They also work fast, so it is easy to move onto the next project that does not work. However, a social network is about quality and relationship building.

## **The Ties That Bind**

The ties that bind one person to another and customers to brands are often hard to see. Thus, we need to take a leap of faith that they are indeed being built. Sure, we can measure participation, sales increases over a long period, and survey results, all of which are good, but we may not really be able to perceive how strong the brand ties are until something happens that requires brand loyalty. As the saying does, “Stuff Happens.” At these times, it is great to have a hardcore group of supporters.

## **Not So Different**

Therefore, in asking for a leap of faith about social networks, are we asking for something unusual? Not really. Companies routinely spend large sums of money on brand advertising for television, radio, and print media, but they have no idea if it is helping to build brand strength. How many public relations campaigns have been waged with the only measurement of success being how many lines of copy about the brand have been printed? We do not know if what is written makes an impact, but we assume it does. So starting a niche social network is similar, with one exception. In time we will understand its impact, and we will be able to influence customers through it.

## Yet Very Different

While we must take a leap of faith to start a niche social network, we can look forward to some great benefits we do not receive with more traditional marketing and public relations tools.

- 1- First and foremost, companies with their own niche social networks will own their own list of members and not just pay to access someone else's list.
- 2- Such companies will also be able to easily communicate with "buzz agents" (members) and at a cost much less than for traditional media.
- 3- When such a company needs to communicate very quickly with customers, it will be able to do so without waiting for a publishing date.
- 4- Companies with niche social networks will be able to ask their members what they think about a new product or service and obtain instant input to help make the product or service better.
- 5- Because such companies are listening to, providing, and initiating communications, they will be building relationships. Thus, they will be able to sense market attitude shifts that better serve customers or clients.

## Important Social Network Rules

- 1- Never hard sell.
- 2- Bring people with similar interests together.
- 3- Provide information that is relevant and helpful to the prospect or client, not just to the company.
- 4- Make it easy to obtain the information.
- 5- Allow communications between members and company staff even when it may not be exactly what the company executives want to hear. Take this opportunity to correct the problem and explain via the forum or blog. Face it head on and a negative will be turned into a positive.
- 6- Maintain communications. Be active, urging the staff to be active on forums and blogs.
- 7- Look for outside "experts" to add content to the social network. This shows that the company cares about providing quality information and that the company executives are open minded.
- 8- Update often.
- 9- Treat members as you would like to be treated if you were a member. And of course you are.

## Building a Niche Social Network

Whether building a consumer network or a special interest branded network or adding a niche social network to a business-to-business website, it is important to have some guidelines.

- 1- Plan a strategy for the niche social network.
- 2- Know who the company wants to influence- Target, target, target,
- 3- The technology used and the creativity deployed need to be reasonably priced. Web designers need to put more into the content, marketing, and maintenance of the website.

- 4- Make the website easy to update. If it is too complex or expensive, it will not get done.
- 5- Recruit your most passionate staff to be involved. That passion will resonate.
- 6- Web designers need to be able to easily add features members want and delete features they are not using. This along with a great deal of member interaction and information keeps will keep the website dynamic.

Let me make this clear. I am not saying companies should stop advertising and public relations activities. These are very important activities, which, by the way, are becoming very similar. But that is another white paper. What I am suggesting is that companies embrace this natural human tendency to socialize as an opportunity for to influence the market. Take the leap of faith. Remember, in the end, it really isn't that big of a leap.

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#### Note

One company offering a unique and reasonably priced niche social network service is Octane [www.octanecorp.com](http://www.octanecorp.com). The company provides a modular approach to building social networks. You can start small and easily build over time.