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Demystifying Social Networking

Social networking sites are here to stay in some form or other. They are ubiquitous, but will they continue to grow at a rapid pace trumpeting some other new widget? Yes, for the next 4-5 years at least. The style, format, widgets and user base may morph into the next generation of social networking sites, but the ability for internet users to communicate amongst themselves or to the net universe will continue to grow. This white paper discusses how to use them on corporate, association, and educational websites.

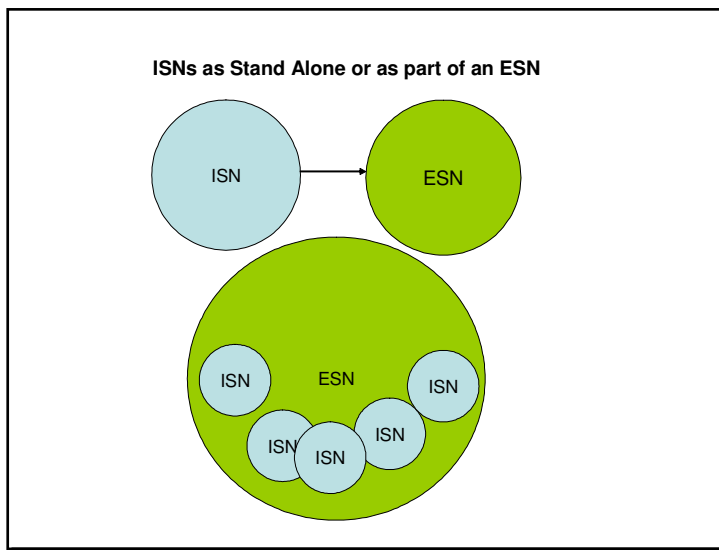
Social networking sites break down into two broad categories: Internal social networking (ISN) and External social networking (ESN) sites. Both types will increase the feeling of community among people. ISNs are closed/private communities and comprised of groups of people within a company, association, society, education provider and organization or even an "invite only" group created by a user in an ESN. ESNs such as Facebook, LinkedIn or MySpace are open/public and available to all web users to communicate and are designed to attract advertisers. ISNs may be on a company's intranet or an association's members-only section. Both ISNs and ESNs can increase an entity's return on investment (ROI), but ESNs will have a distinct edge based on their generally larger audience attractive to advertisers. Depending on your goals and objectives, it is important to set priorities and goals when determining whether to create an ISN or ESN.

Differences between ISNs and ESNs

Webster's New Millennium Dictionary defines social networking as: "the use of a website to connect with people who share personal or professional interests, place of origin, education at a particular school, etc."

This broad definition needs a narrower focus for anyone deciding to incorporate a social networking site on their own website or starting a new site. Other than the closed/private and open/public differences, how else do ISNs and ESNs differ?

- Amount of Disclosure: ISN members—especially in a corporate or professional network—will usually be more circumspect when completing profiles and postings. On the other hand, ESN members may well embellish qualifications, accomplishments, adventures and degrees as their career is not on the line.
- Objectives: Associations or not-for-profits may use social networking sites to attract and increase membership. Companies may use ISNs to retain employees by creating a community. Companies can also use ESNs to attract advertisers interested in targeting specific products and services.



- Focus: ISNs are more specific in their focus while ESNs target broad groups of people to join. Once joined, ESNs work hard at directing people to more specific groups or niches of further interest to the user. Think of it as an ISN within an ESN.

According to eMarketer's December 2007 "Social Network Marketing: Ad Spending and Usage" Report, social networking is an activity that 37% of US adult Internet users and 70% of online teens engage in every month, and the numbers continue to grow. eMarketer projects that by 2011, one-half of online adults and 84% of online teens in the US will use social networking. It's no wonder that corporate America is embracing the social networking phenomenon!

Community, neighborhoods, and homes!

Companies creating ISNs understand that connecting its employees with one another provides an edge to retain valuable employees by creating a feeling of community with the person in the next office, city or country. In this case, the person next door happens to be on the internet while you are at home on your computer. Employees are able to connect with one another regardless of physical proximity. According to an IDG News Service article by Elizabeth Montalbano, David Liu, senior vice president of social media, messaging, and home pages at AOL, said at the 2008 Consumer Electronics Association show in Las Vegas that the key to the success of social networks is that they allow people to tell their "stories" online to make connections that can exist both online and in real life. Communities that allow people to do this in a user-friendly way will have the most success in the long run.

Telling stories is great because everyone wants to be heard. The beauty of social networking sites is the interaction between the person telling the story and the person reading--or listening--to the story.

Who hasn't heard of Facebook or MySpace or LinkedIn or YouTube? Just about everybody. If you haven't, check them out. What about Spock or Plaxo Pulse? If you don't know the names of these two social networking sites, it's not surprising. Over the coming years, your email inbox will be cluttered with emails from friends and colleagues inviting you to add your profile to unfamiliar social networking websites.

The Ever Present Privacy Issues

Any number of white papers can be written on this topic. Be careful what personal information you include on any site. Using a tag or screen name visible to the public affords some confidentiality. Any individual member's profile should be scrubbed from the database upon leaving a company and be part of HR's exit procedures. The profile page for that individual should only include a message directing visitors to another page and/or stating that the person has left the company.

Potential Uses for ISNs and ESNs

ISNs are particularly important for companies with multiple offices. People in one office can get to know people in another office and can put a face to a name by reading their profile and viewing their picture. The same can be said about associations. Many national associations have state and local chapters that have difficulty staying connected with others all focused on the same goals. All required fields on a profile should be searchable by other members. Relevant content keeps people engaged and returning to the ISN. Social networks have many attributes depending on the use of the network.

The following is a partial list:

- For HR: Ask questions to employees regarding benefits and upcoming events. Read employee profiles to get to know and respond to staff. Create a dialog, survey or poll.
- For Product Management: Invite employees to access a beta website to try new online product offerings/user functionality and elicit feedback/comments.
- For cross promotion of other products and services: For instance, football fans are interested in their favorite team tickets. The fan club (or ISN) should include advertisements for the fan store.
- For product and service providers: An ESN is a great place to include ads of interest to users by targeting specific content provided by the user and matching it to relevant ads.
- For people connecting just for the fun of it: Finding common interests, hobbies or past experiences can turn into friendships. Turning a corporate ISN into a dating service is not the intended result, but an interesting story for the water cooler!

ISN's for associations and societies

Traditionally, association and society management are overwhelmed by work and under funded, but its members expect a big bang for their dues. These same groups are always looking for ways to keep members engaged and, if possible, directed towards the association services which hopefully generate revenue. Community building in the past has been through seminars, networking events, trade shows, and

continuing professional education. Although social networking sites have been around for a number of years, companies and associations should use terms to describe a social networking site such as "Getting to Know You" or "Talk Back" or some familiar play on words.

Nuts and Bolts

First of all, the "build it and they will come" philosophy does not work for ISNs or ESNs. It is not a matter of purchasing software or building a social networking website for people to use. Unfortunately, there are still only 24 hours in a day and life has many competing priorities for our time. Many who add social networks to their site are disappointed when a posting or blog sits untouched for days/weeks/or months. Likewise, users will not engage in a social networking site that they perceive as stale or old. First, understand that members need to be pushed to use social networks.

From a business perspective, how can social networking be leveraged to grow a vibrant user database attractive to advertisers? There are primarily two ways to spur people to engage in the networks. First, the company sends emails to potential users to request they join a particular group based on the interests listed in their profile. Second, a Moderator monitors group postings and adds content to keep the info timely. There needs to be compelling content to keep users returning as social networks takes time away from other activities. A moderator can be a paid staff person or an interested member of the social networking group. As anyone on Facebook or MySpace can tell you, a picture or better yet, a video, is worth a 1000 posts!

Defining ROI

Social networks will account for 6.9% of all online ad spending in 2011, up from 4.6% in 2007, according to a December 2007 e-Marketer article.

Students use ESNs and ISNs to keep track of the latest antics of friends and strangers. Business professionals use them to connect with lost business colleagues, stay in touch, and find leads or jobs. Last but not least, advertisers use them to

market their products and services in the most efficient and effective manner to this population. The following will help focus your strategies and ultimate goals in developing a blue print of how to leverage social networking sites to increase and retain business. Are you:

- Looking to increase “eyeballs” to your website to purchase products and services?
- Promoting services to your existing client, member or employee?
- Providing a value added benefit for internal employees or members to meet?
- Targeting a specific niche of internet users to sell advertising?
- Considering all of the above?

All scenarios must be measurable and both sides of the equation must be understood. All must reflect Marketing 101 basics. The advertiser needs to identify key messaging of interest to the target audience, provide a call to action and track the response.

According to Wikipedia, there are over 125 social networking sites on the web and counting.

ESNs are propagating like bunnies across the internet. This number has increased exponentially as new niches of users become more involved and corporate America understands their importance. As time goes on, however, large well funded general ESNs like Facebook and MySpace will continue to acquire successful fledgling ESNs. The technology to build a social networking site is rather simple. At a high level, create a login and password functionality for users to upload videos, pictures and text, build an indexed search engine for users to search preferences, allow both groups to post messages or speak to each other and place targeted advertising strategically on the site and in communications. That’s it.

The future of ISNs looks much brighter than for ESNs. Companies and associations want their employees and members to stay connected and feel a sense of community. The department responsible for maintaining the ISNs is Human Resources, Communication and/or Membership.

ISNs, by virtue of their closed nature, are exclusive. Generally, anything exclusive is also perceived as elite. Large companies should definitely consider adding an ISN to

their intranet or members only section of their website. As companies try much harder to keep employees happy who are scattered all over the globe, ISNs can be used to attract and retain workers.

Conclusion

The social networking site doesn't have to be fancy or include all the bells and whistles of the huge ESNs. The most important outcome should be an engaged community of happy members. Everything else will fall into place.