

# Conscious Careering

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**Social networking websites don't replace traditional networking methods; they amplify them!**

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While I try to stay away from the prediction business on most occasions, I can't resist pulling out my crystal ball on this one. Based on my ringside seat to a large number of business dealings here in the Puget Sound area, it strikes me that the whole breed of "social networking" websites that has sprung up in recent years is not only here to stay, but will become an essential aspect of doing business in the very near future. In fact, within two years or less, my prediction is that the professional world will be divided neatly into those people who are using these sites effectively on a daily basis to conduct business—and those who have failed to embrace them and are missing out on many great opportunities as a result.

Sound crazy? Remember, one could have said the same thing about e-mail, Internet search engines, or the cell phone. Every new business technology, in fact, seems highly suspect until it ends up proving itself, which is exactly my point with regard to the social networking world and the leading websites that comprise it such as Myspace, Facebook, and LinkedIn.com. While the jury has been out for a while on the actual utility of these sites in a business context, my belief is that these tools have finally reached a "tipping point" of acceptance from which it will now be almost impossible to turn back.

"But wait," I can hear some of you out there objecting, "I've been on these sites before and they seem way too cold and impersonal to be of much use—or a poor substitute at best for the proven merits of traditional face-to-face networking." If you're thinking this way, you're definitely not alone. I'd simply say, with all due respect and as somebody known to be skeptical of such things, myself, that you're missing the fundamental point. These sites don't actually *replace* any of the tried-and-true methods that professionals use to build relationships; they simply *amplify* the efficiency and effectiveness of these efforts to an almost unbelievable degree.

Want a case in point? Let's take the LinkedIn site as an example, since it's the one with which I'm the most familiar. Let's say you're a small business owner who sells language translation services to companies who conduct business internationally. How would you go about finding

companies who might be good potential customers for your services? Or better yet, how would you identify the names of the *specific* individuals at each company who wield the purse strings and would actually be responsible for making the desired purchasing decision?

Certainly, a professional in this situation could tap into their existing network and make 15, 20, or 25 calls a day to try and track down some appropriate prospects. Alternatively, an individual could visit the library or hire a list broker to develop a suitable database of firms that match a series of relevant size, location, and industry parameters. Each of these traditional approaches, however, suffers from a potential flaw or two. The first approach is not only time-consuming, but requires a great deal of guesswork to figure out which networking contacts might be able to make introductions to the key corporate accounts of interest. The second approach, on the other hand, is arguably more targeted, but can be quite expensive and still requires the business owner or salesperson to make a "cold" contact without any networking horsepower to back it up.

That's where a social networking tool like LinkedIn comes in, however. These types of sites are often able to solve both of the above problems simultaneously. Not only can the user search through an on-line network of millions of business decision-makers instantaneously, using a set of precise search terms, but they can also see *who they know that knows* these people directly—and then go through a chain of trusted connections to "warm the contact up" and maximize their odds of a positive response. It's quite an incredible thing, once you get the hang of it, and the business owner in this case could start from scratch and uncover dozens of near-perfect targets (e.g. localization managers, global marketing professionals, purchasing managers, etc.) within a mere 5-10 minutes of search time.

So whether you're an entrepreneur, sales professional, employment recruiter, job seeker, or anybody else whose livelihood depends on making connections with the right kinds of people, a few well-chosen "social networking" tools should quickly find a place in your arsenal. These sites may not ever (let's hope!) replace the importance of getting together in person from time to time to enhance one's relationships, but just like Paul Bunyan had to concede defeat to the chainsaw, these tools are here to stay—and those professionals who ignore them will soon find themselves at a serious disadvantage!

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