

Social Networking Goes Professional

Doctors, Salesmen, Executives Turn to New Sites to Consult, Commiserate With Peers; Weeding Out Impostors

by Jessica E. Vascellaro, August 28, 2007

When radiation oncologist Michael Tomblyn recently saw a 21-year-old patient whose eye was protruding from its socket, he turned to his fellow physicians for help. Dozens of doctors offered suggestions, including fungal infection, HIV-associated lymphoma or a cocaine-associated sinus problem, eventually steering him toward the correct answer: rhabdomyosarcoma, a fast-growing cancer most often observed in young children.

The diagnosis didn't take place in a doctor's lounge. It happened on Sermo.com, a social-networking site for licensed physicians, which Dr. Tomblyn and 25,000 doctors like him visit regularly to consult with colleagues specializing in areas from dermatology to psychiatry.

"It is a way for us to commiserate and know we are still talking to others like us," says 36-year-old Dr. Tomblyn, who works for the University of Minnesota Medical Center.

ONLINE SCHMOOZING


Some DOs and DON'Ts for using professional social-networking sites:

DON'T:

- Offer to do business with someone you meet immediately.
- Give away information specific to your company.

DO:

- Share your perspectives on news that's already public.
- Continue more intimate discussions over email and on the phone.



Social networking, popularized by teens sharing information with their friends online on Web sites such as Facebook Inc., is now blooming in the business world, thanks to new social networks that enable professionals and executives in industries such as advertising and finance to rub virtual elbows with colleagues.

Millions of professionals already turn to broad-based networking sites like LinkedIn to swap job details and contact information, often for recruiting purposes. Business executives also

have turned to online forums, email lists and message boards to sound off on information related to their industries.

Now, online services are trying to promote a more personal type of business networking. Unlike relatively simple message boards that are open to all, these new sites — including Sermo.com for doctors and INmobile.org for the wireless industry — have features such as profile pages showing professional credentials; personal blogs that function like a kind of online diary; links to "friends" online; electronic invitations to real or online events; and instant-messaging.

Social networking is just one of many consumer technologies, including blogs, wikis and virtual worlds, to cross over into the corporate world. It is happening as social networking is moving more into the mainstream. Leading consumer social-networking sites attracted more than 110 million unique monthly U.S. visitors in July, up more than 40% from the previous July, according to comScore Inc.



For a variety of reasons, social networking has been slower to take off in the business world. Employees are wary of disclosing too much to potential competitors, and loose-lipped executives can easily embarrass themselves and their companies online. Policing these services' memberships to weed out impostors can be difficult, and the sites are still in the early stages of turning their networks into sustainable businesses. Also, business users typically have less time to devote to socializing online and are willing to do so only if they believe they are getting a unique benefit from the site.

The Wisdom of Crowds

Here are a few social networking sites targeted at professionals in particular industries:

Site / Industry	Who Can Join	Comment
Sermo.com / Medicine	U.S. licensed physicians	Site draws in members with features like free access to news from medical journals.
New Reuters site / Finance	Employees whose companies are Reuters customers.	For real-time communicating, network will link to Reuters instant-messaging service.
INmobile.org / Wireless Telecommunications	High level executives in wireless businesses or related industries.	Site arranges conference calls and hosts networking receptions to delve deeper into popular discussion topics.
AdGabber.com / Advertising	Anyone interested in advertising.	Video-sharing area of the site is focused on uploading and commenting on commercials.

Source: WSJ Research

"Professionals are fairly protective about their social networks which they spend their whole lives to build," says Mikolaj Jan Piskorski, assistant professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. He adds that the appeal of social networking is limited largely to industries where workers are fairly isolated from their colleagues on a day-to-day basis, like medicine, construction and sales.

Many of the new services are free to members. Revenue comes from advertising or charging outside businesses access to data and member discussions. For example, Sermo Inc. of Cambridge, Mass.,

generally charges \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year to nonmedical businesses like hedge funds, which use it to research such things as how doctors feel about new drugs. They can monitor online discussions, with the doctors' names omitted, or see a tally of topics being discussed on the site — like a new medical device or a controversial cancer treatment — to determine what's rising or falling in popularity.

The site, founded by Daniel Palestrant while he was a surgical resident in Boston and launched last year, discloses its business model to users when they register. Members say they don't mind that their conversations are accessible to others, particularly since their identities are concealed. In this, Sermo is different from many other sites. Doctors are generally more interested in getting treatment advice and access to other doctors' experiences than in networking for new business partners. As a result, the site doesn't require users to use their real names, although Sermo itself verifies and holds the identities of everyone who registers.

INmobile.org — a social network for the wireless industry launched last year by Adam Zawal, former director of the Yankee Group's Wireless US Research Program and the executive search firm IdealWave Solutions, based in Harvard, Mass. — has a different business model. Its basic services are free to its members, about 730 high-level executives at cellphone makers, wireless operators and media companies. But members can choose to pay \$2,000 a year to list promotions and ads in a special "marketplace" section.



Some of the new sites simply charge a membership fee. This fall, for example, Reuters Group PLC is planning to launch a new social-networking service, tentatively named "Reuters Space," for fund managers, traders and analysts. For a fee, which hasn't yet been set, they will be able to log on to create profiles with industry-relevant information like their "asset class" and "instruments," check financial news feeds and ruminate about the industry on personal blogs. However, the Reuters service will only allow employees to join if their companies are Reuters customers. It also plans to allow companies to block certain features like blogging and to archive employees' online activities for compliance purposes.

Online networking services are trying to broaden their appeal with new ways of making sure their members are who they say they are. For example, Sermo authenticates each of its members by checking their credentials against several of the 10,000 databases they have access to. The service also requires users to answer three verifiable personal questions, ranging from their phone number to where they got their medical degrees before they can sign up.

INmobile.org relies on member referrals and email confirmations, but says it is looking into stricter methods, like calling up the person or their colleagues, since emails can be easily faked. The service says it turns away more than half who apply, admitting only director-level employees and above from large companies, top-level executives from smaller companies and vice-president level and above from midsize businesses.

Even after these measures, it can be difficult getting business people to converse freely with each other online. Alexander Pigeon, vice president of international for MLB Advanced Media LP, the interactive media and Internet arm of Major League Baseball, is guarded about what he shares on INmobile.org, which he recently joined to stay on top of big trends in wireless. "I certainly wouldn't post something about my company that wasn't publicly released," says Mr. Pigeon, who instead sticks with "pontifications" on broad trends like the future of mobile music.

But taking a risk on an advertising social-network paid off for Angela Glenn of Long Beach, Calif. The 40-year-old graphic designer first joined a free social network created by the blog AdRants as a "lurker," reading but not contributing to the site. Before long, she gained the confidence to debate topics like Web-site design, and she and one sparring partner grew so fond of each other's styles that they eventually started an ad agency together, the GASP Company LLC. "You get to hear potential partners out and see how they think about things," she says. "It's the closest thing you get to a personal recommendation."

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