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Social Networks and Your Next Job

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Facing one of the most challenging job markets in a few generations? Never fear. Befriend the social networks and you open up plenty of opportunities to establish, tweak and tout your unique personal brand.

Think of it as old-school networking with a new feature set dropped on top. While social networks will never replace old-school face-to-face exposure, if you're hunting for that next opportunity, you ignore them at your peril. When looking for work, or connecting online, heed this advice...

Manage your LinkedIn brand. Pursue positive recommendations from past coworkers. Be generous in doling out carefully written, well thought out appraisals of past coworkers, collaborators and vendors (before they ask). Be honest, and never recommend with reservations.

Initiate and engage in discussions across the social networks. Seek out online groups that parallel your meatspace activities and interests. Start with your alumni group. Don't have one? Start it. Initiate conversations, collect ideas. Get people thinking and linking to your blog, IF you maintain it. Demonstrate your active engagement and critical skills. Have a unique view, opinion, technique or philosophy? Craft a compelling presentation, add the SlideShare application and post it to your LinkedIn profile.

Be perfect. Obsessively check and double-check the grammar, spelling and punctuation of everything you release onto the Web. Nothing can destroy a reputation faster than imperfect communications.

Become an expert on something you love. Frequent industry newsfeeds. Become an up-to-the-minute source for current happenings. Respond to news and analysis with insightful comments. Email a reporter or blogger with story suggestions, original thoughts, ideas or feedback. Engage in the discussion.

Respect the longevity of Internet information. Words and images associated with you on the Internet stick around. For a LONG, LONG time. Yes, it's deceptively quick and simple to release something, but near-impossible to take it back. Develop and nurture a well-formed censor between your mouse and that Submit or Post button. Use it often. When in doubt, second-guess yourself and close the browser or email composition window.

Create a quality avatar photo. More often then not, your avatar photo is either the only face or the first face your online connections will see. Make it count. Hire a photographer if you need one. Beware of going flirty/silly/sexy/overly serious/arthouse unless that look aligns with your personal brand. Seek consistency. Resize your headshots into the most common formats. Have .jpg,

.png and .tif versions of each ready at hand. Using your avatar, post a comment, then step back and squint your eyes. Does your headshot stand out and reinforce your words and presence? If no, then tweak it. Make it black and white. Boost the contrast until it starts to sear the eyeballs. Commission a professional-looking illustration or caricature—there's plenty of starving artists out there. Reshoot from an obscure angle. Whatever you do, make it different than the thousands of other boring, stodgy, unmemorable headshots.

Use social networking tools for research. Understand and know your potential employer or contact better than they know themselves. Nothing is more annoying to an employer or associate than a candidate or partner that doesn't know squat about their company. This is the information age—engage. Dig deeper than the others—link sideways and see the trends and surrounding environment. Use this information to comment and interact with the company of your desire intelligently. Follow your dream companies on Twitter, Facebook, company fanpages, and read their blogs. Feel their culture.

Keep it professional. Don't go stalker and assume you are going to be that golden contact's 'link' or 'friend.' Play it cool. Follow appropriate professional feeds but leave the personal stuff alone for the time being. It's a surprisingly short journey from eligible and interested to creepy and excessive.

Find industry events through social networking. Attend talks and events that have invites sent via social networks. This will allow you to chime in with good comments about something that is a good middle ground. Plus, the people you meet are likely to be well connected.

Edit, condense, distill. In all interactions, keep it short, real and compelling. Logorrhea prohibited. Respect your readers' time.

Support what you love and who you are. Connect and support your cause, purpose or mission on a social network. There are nigh-infinite causes, so pick one that you are passionate about. You might find a common ground with your contact, and if nothing else you'll be able to take pleasure in interacting with like-minded individuals.

Patrol and defend your LinkedIn profile at all times. Resist the temptation to let it become a resume morgue. If you are working, keep it updated. If you're not working, volunteer your time to avoid resume holes. Write, tweak, rewrite and adjust your profile. Keep it short, but compelling. Verify that it is working for you—providing a great elevator-speech introduction to your personal brand. Make it overarching—focus less on your current job responsibilities and more on the big-picture skills you've acquired during your time on this planet. While employed, seek interaction and recommendations, this will make it less obvious that you are in the unemployment-throes when you are on the job prowl. Use LinkedIn past the cliché and you might actually enjoy yourself.

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Don't start a blog. Just don't. Unless you can commit to a minimum of 15 hours per week for research, writing and rewriting, don't do it. Instead, plow this time into commenting, tweeting and other online interactions. You'll get a better return on your investment and comparable visibility.

Still considering starting a blog? Search your experience, do a lot of reading, and honestly ask yourself if you have something real, compelling and worthwhile to contribute to the discussion. Avoid nursing a desire to be heard. There's a million voices out there, and the need to be original and compelling is essential. Simply put, don't be fooled into thinking you NEED a blog to be hip or relevant; a blog can just as easily work against you. Never underestimate the insatiable hunger for new content fostered by the 24/7 Internet content cycle.

Learn how to create groups and assign privacy settings on Facebook. This is essential for ensuring that your drunken iPhone update at 3am doesn't land on a new business contact's feed. Facebook contains robust privacy filters and options, use them before it's too late.

Consider abandoning MySpace. Statistics show that working, college educated professionals reside and interact on Facebook, while kids, musicians and celebrities stay on MySpace. Think about it, and decide how you want to be perceived and what company you want to keep.

Add your Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn links to your email signature. Remove your mailing address. If you need to ask why, start reading through this list again from the top. Consider the same for your personal business card. Be accessible…always.

Remember that networking will never be replaced by social-networking. Your face seen at an event is the best first introduction you can have; while your request to be friends via email as a first encounter will inherently appear suspect.

What Do You Think?

This job environment is unlike anything we've ever seen before. Maybe you're out there in the trenches right now. What's working for you? Did we forget something? Have a story of a social network faux pas? Let us know. Good luck out there.

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