

What is Social Networking?

We have all heard about Social Networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter but you may have questions about what they are and how your Local Joint Committee can possibly use them to communicate with your members. This document attempts to explain what Social Networks are and describe the potential these networks can hold as a promotional tool.

What are Social Networks?

Social Networking has become very popular during the past few years, but it can still be very difficult to understand for someone new to social networking. Social networking is based on a certain structure that allows people to both express their individuality and meet people with similar interests. Much like in real-life groups of friends or family, Internet based networking allows you to meet individuals and connect with groups for the interchange of information, interests and opinions. This structure includes having profiles, friends, blog posts, widgets, and usually something unique to that particular social networking website -- such as the ability to 'poke' people on Facebook or high-five someone on Hi5.

Profile: This is where you tell those enrolled on that site about yourself. In the case of an LJC, you can use the Profile to tell "friends" (members of your workforce) about the continuing education classes you are offering.

Friends: Friends are trusted members of the site that are allowed to post comments on your profile or send you private messages. You can also keep tabs on how your friends are using social networking, such as when they post a new picture or update their profile. Friends are the heart and soul of social networking. It should be noted that not all social networks refer to them as 'friends' -- LinkedIn refers to them as 'connections' -- but all social networks have a way to designate members as trusted.

Groups: Most social networks use groups to help you find people with similar interests or engage in discussions on certain topics. A group can be anything from "Johnson High Class of '98" to "People Who like Books" to "Doors Fans". They are both a way to connect with like-minded people and a way to identify your interests. Sometimes, groups are called by other names, such as the 'networks' on Facebook. An LJC can create a group for your particular plant's continuing education programs.

Discussions: A primary focus of groups is to create interaction between users in the form of discussions. Most social networking websites support discussion boards for the groups, and many also allow members of the group to post pictures, music, video clips, and other tidbits related to the group. Many businesses are using the discussion area to encourage an exchange between customers and their employees.

As time goes by, some of the social networking sites are taking on their own identity and, consequently, may be of less value to your LJC. For example, MySpace has attracted a large number of college, high school and now junior high school aged students. So, while your kids might use MySpace it is probably of little use to your LJC. However, Facebook, NING (create your own social network) or LinkedIn are being used by professional organizations to nurture relationships with their customers and prospective customers via the Internet.

What Is the Value of Social Network Marketing?

Value is relative based on what your expectations are. Social networking is not the ultimate communication tool, but it can be a secondary promotional tool that can be added to your existing toolbox of promotional activities. Your Local Joint Committee should certainly be aware and watch the evolution of social networks.

There will probably be a percentage of your workforce that is already using social networking websites. However, social networking isn't for everyone and there will always be a group of employees who will never use one, just like there are those who will never use email. Consequently, this form of communication should be viewed as a supplement to your current class promotions and, consequently, should be evaluated based on the time it will take to create and monitor a social network site in comparison to the increase in class awareness and participation.

Certainly, many businesses and professional organizations are finding social networking sites to be a viable form of communication with their target markets. But, like most communication media, social networking is really no different than using good old, face-to-face networking. Communicating, whether in-person or online, is effective when you build and cultivate relationships over time, share useful information, and add value to the workforce.

Six Signs Social Networking Isn't Right for Your LJC

Just because you have heard that some organizations are having great success using social networking doesn't mean they are right for your organization. What are the signs that social networking might not be a good fit for your priorities?

1. Are you techno-savvy?

Do you have a person who is savvy enough to understand the set up and monitoring of any site you set up? Like any other form of communications, it takes time and talent to use social networking website effectively.

2. Your target audience isn't using social networking tools.

Social networking works best when the people you're trying to reach or work with are already members of a community like Facebook or MySpace. Look for opportunities to interact with current or new constituents in the sites they're already using, rather than expecting them to join you on a new site.

3. You don't have time to experiment with something that might not work.
Online communities aren't self-maintaining. They need you to promote them, cultivate them, and give them direction. If your network blossoms, you may be able to step back and watch your users produce and share content. But getting to that point takes a lot of time and effort.
4. You're not willing to deal with technologies that don't work as well as they could.
Social networking is not yet a well-oiled machine. The technology is changing rapidly. Things break. If your organization decides to invest in social networking, you'll need a reliable consultant or a staff member (not a volunteer or an intern) who is willing to experiment, figure out how to get stuff working, and approach these tools with a sense of adventure. They'll need patience to deal with platforms that don't necessary work as well as they could, or even as well as advertised.
5. You're not ready to invest in gaining a real understanding of the medium.
So you want to increase your continuing education classes with Millennials and Gen Y'ers by reaching out to them through social networking sites? Good idea. But in order to have success with social networking, it's critical that you understand the culture of the communities you're joining. Typical social networking site users expect a collaborative, open approach. Anything that seems like a hard sell or like it was put together by a committee will be ignored, or, worse, ridiculed.
6. You want clear editorial control over your brand and message.
People who use social networking tools are not interested in promoting your brand or following your message guidelines. When you get involved with these sites, it's hard to control the context in which your organization shows up. For instance, it's completely possible that you'll appear in someone's list of "friends" alongside causes with which you do not want to be associated. Those who succeed with social networking do so by letting their constituents have a substantial voice in their message, rather than by setting firm rules and expecting users to follow them.

Does Social Networking Make Sense for Your Joint Committee?

Before you jump into using one of the hundreds of social networks on the Internet, you need to do some exploring on your own. I would encourage you to go online to look at the most popular sites including MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. As you look around, ask yourself, “Would this site connect with our target audience?”

Where to start: As I suggested in the discussion of email and text messaging marketing, the place to start is to ask your participants. Include questions about social networking web sites on your email/text messaging permission request survey form to find out:

1. If a majority of your workforce is using social networking web sites.
2. If they are, which sites are they using?
3. Is a majority of your workers using one or two networks primarily?
4. Would your workforce think that communicating through a social networking site would be appropriate and effective?

Next Steps: Based on the results of the information you get back, have an in-depth conversation with your LJC to determine the following:

1. Will social networking significantly improve class registration and attendance?
2. If so, determine which site(s) will be used or if you should create your own social network.
3. Decide who will be responsible for setting up the LJC’s profile and monitoring and responding to any discussion questions?

If your LJC is convinced that the use of one or more social networking sites will be advantageous to your workforce, go for it. Remember, you should have a high level of confidence that your workforce is using the selected social networking site(s) and that this form of communication will further enhance the understanding and participation in your continuing education classes. If you’re not so sure, wait and watch. As is true with most new phenomenon, time will tell if this new form of communication can be useful to your Joint Committee’s efforts.