

# Effective social networking for businesses and professionals

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## WHAT?

Imagine a conference that is never ending with individuals, groups, cliques and networks constantly exchanging information, ideas and content 24 hours a day.

Success in social networking is highly subjective but is often measured by the numbers of 'followers' 'friends' or 'connections' an individual or a company has.

In reality success using platforms like LinkedIn, twitter or Facebook is like any form of networking; the quality of the information you share with your network will determine the strength of those relationships. If you provide your network with access to good information, they will respect you for it.

## WHY?

Businesses and professionals across various fields have adopted social media platforms to network with their existing contacts and target audiences more effectively. The vast majority of activity in this arena has been through the use of Twitter and LinkedIn, although Facebook's prevalence as the network of choice for millions of users means it cannot be ignored. Newer networks such as Quora and location based mobile applications such as Foursquare are gaining traction and may be worth investigating once you've become familiar with the rest.

Before you embark on a wholehearted adoption of social networks you should **consider your reasons** for doing so.

If you are considering as an individual using twitter or LinkedIn to share an interesting article you've read, or your thoughts and ideas about business, ask yourself: **Is this what I would do normally?**

## HOW?

Your social networking profile is your window on the world. Choose a good photograph; pick your username(s) very carefully. On twitter it will appear as @username and will become your identity on that network from the moment you begin.

If you're tweeting or networking through LinkedIn groups under your own identity, think about how you would normally 'share' information with your professional cohort. Try **reading the business pages** or the news from your industry's best trade magazine online and then using **the 'share' button** on your browser, tweet the link to your followers, editing the 140 characters so you get your point across.

## TIPS FOR FOLLOWING & CONNECTING

Following individuals and companies on twitter is not the same as connecting through LinkedIn. The former requires no relationship to exist between the followers and followed. LinkedIn requires the individual requesting a connection to 'know' the person they are requesting a link with.

- **Follow your interests.** People that get the most out of Twitter tend to follow a variety of accounts: friends, family, professional connections, local businesses and events, and most importantly, people who share their passions.

- **Connect your profiles.** Business people have learned to use LinkedIn quicker than twitter but the two platforms work well together. For example, if any of your connections on LinkedIn are using twitter and have listed their @username in their LinkedIn profile, you can ask LinkedIn to group them all together so you can follow their tweets.

- **Use #hashtags.** When a popular topic is being discussed on twitter, users often add a #hashtag which is easily searchable with a single click. For example, during the 2010 winter snow storms, #uksnow was widely used by those communicating their experiences.

- **Be well mannered.** You would thank someone if they referred you or your business to their own network so why wouldn't the same apply in the online world? Thanks for a retweet or a tweet with #ff and their username (a hashtag people use to encourage others – it means 'Follow Friday') can go a long way and help you solidify relationships with companies and individuals

- **Privacy.** Protecting your tweets can be a good way of keeping a low profile while maintaining communication with your network. If you want a select group of followers to hear your missives, this is the way to go.

- **Spam.** Twitter is prone to spam accounts (normally pornography) which follow you particularly if your account profile is individual – ie not a company twitter account. It's very easy to block these spam accounts when they follow your profile, but you must ensure you have your notification settings correct so that each time you get a new follower, you receive an email so you can check who they are and if they are the right type!

- **Keep tweeting.** A study by web consultancy Intendance published in the Law Society Gazette found that 66% of the UK's top 50 law firms had set up at least one account on Twitter. However, of the 48 accounts, 19 had issued zero tweets, despite some having hundreds of followers. You should also consider the fact that if people are following you, it's likely they are following hundreds of other profiles. If you tweet only once a day or once a week, you'll not encourage people to find your content interesting.

- **Check company policy.** Does your company or employer have a policy about external communication through social networks?

Question	Considerations	Appropriate action
I and my company want to communicate better with our existing customer base	Confidentiality; definition of 'communicate', PR strategy, customers' usage of networks	Start twitter stream under company or top executive's profile. Integrate feed(s) with linkedin profile(s). Share appropriate news/blogs/tweets/content
I want to promote my company's products and services	What do you sell? How do you normally win business? Do you have a marketing budget?	Non-advertising promotion through social networks isn't good manners – there has to be something in it for the follower. Depending on what you sell, why not try giving some away for free? Expertise can take the form of an informative blog, a regular tweet on topical issues, or contributions to LinkedIn groups.
I want to communicate my company's news	How much & what type of news do you normally communicate? Who are your target audience?	Start twitter stream under company profile. Integrate with employees' LinkedIn profiles using 'tweets' application
I want to network as an individual professional	How do I normally network? Do I have a target group I want to appeal to? Am I conflicted in any way (ie with employer)? What's my/our PR strategy	Start twitter profile under own or assumed name; Integrate feed(s) with LinkedIn profile(s). Share appropriate news/blogs/tweets/content
I don't have the time for all of this nonsense	Mobile networking, commuting, delegation, PR support, social media policy	Approx 46% of twitter users do so with mobile phones; applications are quick to download and easy to use. With the right policy in place, an individual or department can carry out a company's networking activity.