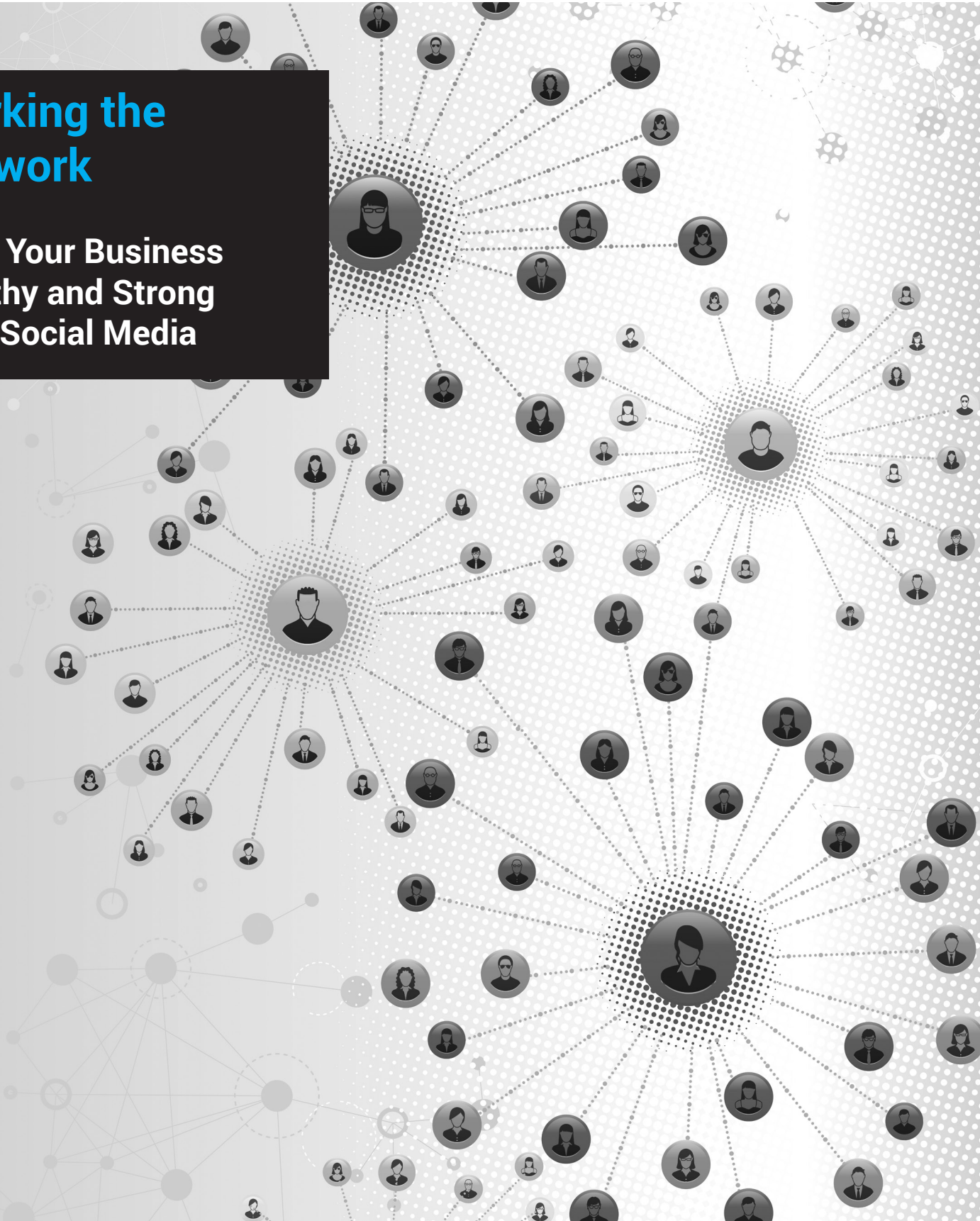


Working the Network

Keep Your Business Healthy and Strong With Social Media



Do you tweet throughout the day? Are you a LinkedIn LION? Whether you're one of the millions of today's social media junkies, or you consider it to be the world's biggest waste of time, social media is having an undeniable impact – on individuals, and of course, on organizations.

Regardless of your personal preferences, your organization needs a proactive social media strategy. Doing nothing is akin to management by abdication... it's a guaranteed recipe for gossip, misinformation, lack of innovation, loss of talent, knowledge and competitive advantage.

Why you need to care about social media

Social networks offer unparalleled access to information and expertise. Used correctly, they provide innovative ways to share and test ideas, shorten learning curves, and acquire expertise.

But beyond information sharing, various forms of social media are also platforms for personal and corporate branding. What's being said about your company online can have a big impact on your organization's reputation. And quite possibly, your personal reputation can be enhanced or damaged by social media. So what can you do to make the most of online networking opportunities? Here are a few ideas to get you started:

Find answers

Social media tools provide a great way to quickly learn from leading business experts and individuals with experience in your specific industry. When you face a unique challenge or just want a second opinion, leverage your network. You can join appropriate groups to post questions, find experts to follow on services like Twitter, search threads in discussion groups, and build your support network.

Candidate research

With more than 250 million users and powerful search capabilities, LinkedIn provides a wealth of information about potential new employees. Once you or your staffing service has identified a promising candidate, use the site to probe deeper before committing to a hiring decision. Check out the candidate's connections; see how savvy his posts are; take a look at what he's working on now. Details like these will give you a much more comprehensive picture of the candidate's true capabilities.

Position yourself (and company) as experts

Whatever your area of specialization, you can use online networking to showcase your talent and expertise:

Be a leader, not a follower

Develop thought leadership in your niche by posting articles that are ahead of the curve in your area of business expertise. Or, establish your own intellectual community within a networking site by creating a group. Your group can offer a discussion forum for hot topics relative to your business, publicize upcoming events and share information with customers and job candidates.

Share links to helpful content

Keeping current with developments in your industry can be a full-time job. As a result, timely, relevant information is extremely valuable to your clients, prospects and other contacts, and your social networks allow you to easily share the most significant news.

Attract top talent

The best professionals stay on top of their game by constantly seeking out new information. Become a trusted source they turn to. Write and post articles about the business or career topics most important to these professionals, and you'll attract more top performers to your organization.

Answer a question in your field to attain expert status within your network

If you're selected as having the best answer to a particular problem, it will show up on your LinkedIn profile. Providing answers is also a great way to strike up online conversations with new contacts and expand your network.

Put your best foot forward

When it comes to social networking for business, more is not always better. While you may be tempted to get every staff member blogging about your company's latest news, their chatter may only be perceived as noise (not to mention a huge waste of productive resources). Be selective. Make sure you pick the right people in your organization – talking about the right things – to have the strongest possible presence on LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media.

Monitor your company's social activity

If you haven't already, develop and institute a formal policy for online social networking. Make it clear to employees the difference between acceptable activity (answering questions within the employee's area of expertise; posting details about an

upcoming webinar you're hosting) and unacceptable (divulging company secrets; sharing intellectual property), as well as the consequences for those actions. Encourage employees to cross-monitor one another's activities, but be sure to appoint a Chief of Police to conduct regular site inspections.

Create an audience

Link your company website and blog to your profiles to get more people reading about you and your company. If you adjust your LinkedIn settings, it will automatically send a notice reminding your contacts to come see what's new.

Go viral

Some social media platforms, like Facebook, allow you to develop apps that sit on other people's profile pages. They, in turn, can spread the word to their friends by inviting them to include the app on their own pages – all with no work from you. The beauty of these apps is that they allow you to engage potential clients and employees by appealing to their likes and interests. Marketing AND fun combined – who would've thought?

For example, one engineering company developed an App to build your own virtual trebuchet (a sort of medieval catapult used to hurl large rocks at castles). The app allowed each user to employ real engineering principles in his design, and then test his trebuchet against others'. The engineering firm had hoped a few thousand engineers would download and use the app – but when it was all said and done, over 500,000 people had participated – and been introduced to the engineering firm in both a fun and memorable way.

Expand your networks

Networking is the number one way small businesses find employees, suppliers and strategic partners. Furthermore, direct personal contacts and referrals typically account for as much as 70% of an entrepreneur's new business. So if you haven't already, place a link to your LinkedIn profile prominently on your website (perhaps the About page) and/or on your blog to encourage more people to become LinkedIn contacts.

Common Sense Tips

Use these tips to make the most of your online networking:

Focus your efforts

Create a system to make sure your networking activities align with your business objectives (e.g., if you use LinkedIn for client prospecting, develop and formalize an interdepartmental strategy).

Otherwise, these sites can wind up being a tremendous waste of your time and effort.

Don't spread yourself too thin

Resist the urge to join every network available. Do your homework upfront to determine which sites are likely to be the most beneficial for your niche. Limit your activity to these networks. Remember, the more profiles you create, the more you will have to sustain.

Build a strong, focused profile

Not surprisingly, higher quality profile information will yield higher quality results. So to develop the strongest profile for your business, build it with your professional image and searchability in mind.

Be sure to include all the following details: accomplishments and professional background, current employer (job title, responsibilities, company's line of business), work history, education, professional and social affiliations, businesses you run, etc. By developing a complete profile, the site will generate the most comprehensive list of potential contacts for you.

Follow up

Remember that relationships – not database entries – provide the real value for your business. Once you establish a new contact, use a contact management tool to schedule follow-ups and keep a history of your relationship.

Avoid these common pitfalls

On any online social media, never:

- Leave negative feedback – Your comments will be around for a very long time, even if you have a change of heart
- Lie – Or otherwise oversell yourself or your company
- Spam – Social media is not a platform for push marketing strategies
- Gossip – Never send forth news that may not be yours to share, or that you cannot verify

Don't be a couch potato

You may get some minimal value from passive participation, but you have to be at least moderately involved on a site to derive any real business value. So get active and stay active. Focus on growing your network. Post. Blog. Refer. Recommend. Just like a real workout, the more effort you put into your online networking, the greater the results you'll see.

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