

## **Avoiding the MySpace Mistake**

*Kerry Miller*

Follow these eight dos and don'ts for marketing your small business through online social networking, and you won't be the bore of the party.

To believers, social networking sites like News Corp.'s (NWS) MySpace are powerful tools for building awareness, strengthening customer loyalty, and driving sales. Skeptics scoff that with free advertising, you get what you pay for. What both sides sometimes miss is that online social networking—like networking in the real world—is all about giving, not taking (see [BusinessWeek.com](http://BusinessWeek.com), 3/26/07, "Network like an Entrepreneur"). We rounded up a slew of experts to share online networking best practices and common mistakes to avoid. Their top eight tips follow.

1. Forget the hard sell. Communications consultant Olivia Fox Cabane says that trying to sell your products, services, or yourself when you first meet someone is the fastest way to ruin a networking relationship before it begins. Instead, she suggests using your own tools and expertise to give something to the other person. On MySpace, too, the most successful businesses are ones that know how to give, whether it's a downloadable screensaver, a chef's exclusive recipes, or a roundup of upcoming local events. "This isn't a direct marketing tool, this is human communication," says Rob Key, chief executive officer of social marketing firm Converseon. "You don't have to beat people over the head."

2. Do your homework. Showing up in flip-flops at a white-tie event is no way to make a good impression. Even when properly attired, attending an event without researching the potential attendees is a waste of time, says Cabane. Online, your virtual behavior and dress is just as important. Online communities like MySpace, Google's (GOOG) YouTube, or Second Life have their own cultures, rules, and social mores that business people disrespect at their peril. Key recommends spending a few weeks experiencing a social networking site as a user before charging in with your business. "You don't want to be like those 45-year-olds hanging out at spring break," Key says.

3. Focus on quality over quantity. Collecting a thick stack of business cards may make you feel important, but it's not a very good way to glean useful contacts. Similarly, sending out flurries of MySpace friend requests probably isn't an efficient use of your time. Instead, Key says, focus on the quality of what you're providing. "If you're giving useful information to the community, you will get friends," he says.

4. Listen before you speak. Networking is a two-way conversation, so be prepared to interact. Beware of being the cocktail party equivalent of the bore who only talks about himself.

5. Authenticity counts. While a phony smile might get a few rolled eyes at a networking event, being reported as a spammer on MySpace can get you kicked off for good. And whether online or in-person, being uncovered as a fraud can trigger a damaging backlash.

6. Be engaging. Talking about the weather is no way to impress, and neither is the same old song and dance. Use your MySpace page to show off the persona of your business, and be sure to refresh your content regularly.

7. Always follow up. Establishing a new connection doesn't end when the party's over, and successful online social networking requires offline connections, too. Integration is key, says Linda Zimmer, president and CEO of social media consultancy MarCom:Interactive. For maximum impact, your MySpace address should be visible on your other printed materials, your Web site, and in your physical storefront, in order to "close the loop."

8. Think long term. Approaching a networking event with the expectation of leaving with a new contract or job offer is missing the point, and so is looking to MySpace for immediate results. "You need to give something to the community before you start looking for an ROI [return on investment]," says Key of Converseon. Although many businesses see a MySpace profile as a free virtual billboard, Rex Briggs, CEO of Marketing Evolution, a marketing ROI measurement

firm, says that community outreach programs make for a better analogy. Giving back to the community has long-term value, even if it doesn't show up on today's balance sheet.

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