



Are you LinkedIn? The Facebook of the business world

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The best way to conduct business is face to face! Despite technology advances and social networking, that part of business has not changed. What has changed, however, is how we get face-to-face with a potential business prospect and how fast.

Enter the power of LinkedIn. LinkedIn has been described as the Facebook of the business world. I see it more as my personal marketing assistant, electronic business card and business private detective.

I first realized LinkedIn's influence at a networking event. Because I didn't know many people in the group, I knew finding the right contacts would be tough. Upon entering the room, a gentleman called out, "Are you Jim Powers of Bohler Engineering?" I did not know him. He then explained that he just "LinkedIn" with me and recognized me from my picture. We had a good conversation and by the end of the event, he was able to introduce me to at least six potential business opportunities. That was over 7,000 LinkedIn connections and hundreds of networking events ago. Here are some ways that I use LinkedIn to market myself and my firm, and capture work.

* Potential Clients: LinkedIn allows you to search all "LinkedIn users" within a company, their titles and sometimes even their job descriptions. Remember when you knew nothing about a potential client when you cold called them? LinkedIn has changed all that. I use LinkedIn to find individuals with the influence to hire my civil engineering firm. I recommend the upgraded pay-for-play version of LinkedIn, as it opens many more doors and saves time as compared to the basic version.

* Networking Events: Currently, my time is split between nearly two dozen organizations so it's critical that I get the most out of every meeting and event. Prior to an event I review the attendee list and research my business development targets on LinkedIn. I check to see who they know, where they worked previously, what college they attended and even look for my competition in their connections. By connecting with them via LinkedIn ahead of time, they now know me and it makes the "face-to-face" at the event much easier. After the event, whether contact is made or not, LinkedIn with your potential client and express how you missed them at the event. It's a great ice breaker.

* Classmates and Colleagues: Through LinkedIn I have been able to connect to almost 1,700 fellow graduates of NYIT. By having something in common with my fellow alums, my chance of making a business connection drastically increases.

You never know what your fellow alums are doing. An old classmate of mine heads the architectural division for the State of New Jersey and another leads the NYC Building Department. These are truly great connections for me and my firm that may have never taken place without LinkedIn.

The same holds true for people in your own company. Many colleagues have worked for other companies and with other clients. A simple scan will offer some great potential client contacts.

* Competition: Generally I do not connect with competitors. I do, however, look at their connections.

On the reverse side, I'm not concerned with competitors seeing my connections because I'm confident in my firm's ability to provide exceptional service and quality.

Even after completing the upfront leg work of establishing a profile and personal connections, LinkedIn still works hard for you. It offers an opportunity to recommend your clients and for them to recommend you. Take advantage of this task and reach out to your most valued contacts as much as possible. If a contact changes jobs, reach out. If a contact gets a promotion, offer congratulations. If a contact has a birthday, wish them well. Take a little time each week to post something; link to an article, add a line item to your profile, write a blog or offer advice. Each time you do this, your contacts receive a notice with your information and picture so you and your company will remain present in their minds.

Using LinkedIn to its fullest potential will allow you to analyze your potential clients, meet your next clients and keep your services on your clients' minds better than any brochure, website (always link to it) and e-mail blast. Use your LinkedIn time efficiently and "happy hunting!"

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