

PROFESSIONALLY SPEAKING

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Practical Social Networking:

RESEARCHING YOUR MARKET

By Ian Griffin

By now you've heard that social media is the latest trend in networking, and you've read platitudes such as "social media connects you with a whole new world of interesting people" and "You can extend your network online." The real questions, of course, are "What, specifically, can I do with social media?" and "How can it help my business?"

Beyond the hype and the very real danger that social media—like all shiny, new things—can become a time-sink and little more, there is real business value in using sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and more. For one thing, you can use all of these popular social media sites to get closer to your audience and understand what they need by performing valuable, up-to-date market research online.

> MARKET RESEARCH ON A GIGANTIC SCALE

There are many ways you can use social media sites to perform your own research, and what's truly astounding is the scale of the networks you can tap into. LinkedIn has more than 47 million members in more than 200 countries around the world, and at the start of 2009, 150 million people around the world were actively using Facebook. In fact, if Facebook were a country, it would be the eighth most populated in the world, just ahead of Japan and behind Bangladesh. Are all these people potential audience members for you as a speaker? Of course not. But social media allows you to select those who might be, and research what interests them.

> FACEBOOK AND LINKEDIN

On Facebook and LinkedIn, the best way to perform research is to sign up for a free account and then join any of the thousands of special interest groups that might fit your interests. Once you become part of a group, you can follow—and even start—specific group discussions to learn more about what people in that industry, profession or niche are talking about.

On LinkedIn, I'm part of a speechwriters group with more than 300 members. I use the group as a regular source of information for my blog articles on rhetoric, either by learning from the conversations others have started or by posing questions to my fellow professionals. By joining the groups that focus on your niche, you can start monitoring what your clients find interesting or ask a few questions of your own.

You can also use LinkedIn, specifically, to search for people you might want to contact in your professional life. In my own case, I have built a large network of more than 500 people who have accepted my invitation to directly connect. These people, in turn, are connected to 186,000 more—friends of my friends who are only two degrees away from me. "So what?" you might ask. So, I can search for people I need to contact by location, job title, company name and many other criteria, and if I find someone I want to talk to who isn't connected to me but is connected to someone I know, I can ask my own acquaintance for an introduction. Speaking in a certain town? Find a friend—or a friend-of-a-friend—who lives there, and ask for a first-hand update.

“If Facebook were a country, it would be the eighth most populated in the world.”



image courtesy www.wordle.net

> TWITTER

Twitter is growing at a rate of more than 40 percent a month. And contrary to popular opinion, it's not simply populated with people announcing what flavor of Venti latte they drank that morning. Twitter can be a rich source of real-time updates that's completely open for searching—even if you don't have your own Twitter account. Speaking at a specific company next month? Log in to search.twitter.com and enter the business name. You can follow what company employees are saying, and you can even follow what others are saying about them. It's a bit like hacking into their e-mail, only it's completely legitimate.

Do you speak for a specific industry? Check out twellow.com. This site automatically categorizes Twitter users into specific industries based on information in their bios and their "tweets." Search for "Dentistry," for example, and you'll get people in this industry as well as those who specialize in working with it. Looking for a localized company? Search "Dentistry San Francisco." Bingo!



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> YOUTUBE

YouTube visitors now view more than 1 Billion videos a day. Seeing what's hot on YouTube can give you incredible insight into a broad cross section of popular culture, or into the specific niche you speak about. Again, the search function is your friend. Out of the billions of videos posted, there are 1,650 about "Dental Schools." More specifically, there are 114 titled "How to Get into Dental School." These might be worth viewing if you speak to the education market.

> SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

What's even more impressive than the user volume, traffic and growth, is that all these social networks are still in their infancy. According to a popular video called "Did You Know? Technology," which you can view—where else?—on YouTube, it took radio 38 years to reach an audience of 50 million; it took TV 13 years; and it took Facebook just two years. Today's online forums contain rich veins of hard facts and crucial conversations that you can tap into. As speakers we can use them to expand our expertise in practical ways.