



Weave yourself a

WEB PRESENCE

If you don't have an online profile, you should. *Michelle Daniels* and *Chris Bullick* celebrate the advantages

The current downturn has demonstrated to many practitioners the importance of creating an impressive online public profile. Be it to look for a new job, or a business opportunity, or simply develop an individual's network, the use of social networking resources such as Facebook and LinkedIn has soared. And it isn't just the younger end of the profession, the Generation Ys, who have jumped on the bandwagon. Creating an online profile and reputation is proving to be a 'must do' for the more experienced and mature professionals too.

But what should you include to create the right online profile for you? And how do you manage your profile to stimulate quality business? How can you build a powerful reputation that distinguishes you from your peers?

See the sites

Social networking websites enable people to promote themselves, connect and interact with others online. Most sites typically enable you to create a profile that shows your history (career, personal or both), your contacts and friends, your interests, your successes, your thoughts and the groups you

belong to. Think of them as your own personal home page – with 'You' as the product. But unlike a home page, these sites enable you and your audience to interact more easily. Your network of contacts can send comments, ask questions, share thoughts, recommend and endorse you for others to see. You can manage what appears on your profile, but the purpose of social networks is to encourage dialogue and interaction online.

In the UK, the most commonly used sites are LinkedIn, Facebook and MySpace (although, like anything related to the web, things can change

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quickly). Each has a different focus and structure: Facebook primarily creates communities of friends (although it does blur the distinction between social and work friends), MySpace also creates networks of friends (primarily to communicate and share music, photos, watch videos) and LinkedIn is very much a business community. Reid Hoffman, founder of LinkedIn, described the distinction between the three as: 'MySpace is the bar, Facebook is the home and LinkedIn is the office.'

The pros and cons

If you are a seasoned professional with a strong network of contacts, they're another way to help you manage that network and keep in touch with people. If you are a more junior tax adviser (perhaps without a profile on your firm's website yet), they are a great way to create your own personal homepage. This can profile your expertise to a specific market and help you build your client and contact portfolio. And if you are a sole practitioner (perhaps without a web presence), social networks enable you to create one free of charge. Also, the main search engines, such as Google, regularly trawl through these sites. If you want people to find you online and make contact, creating a profile on a social networking site can get them in touch more quickly.

While each social network resource can put you in touch with vast numbers of people, what you gain from that interaction very much depends on you. It's easy for involvement in these sites to swallow up chunks of time. If you are also writing a blog (such as an online diary), or tweeting on Twitter (another type of online diary but limited to statements of 140 characters or fewer, and which people can access on their mobiles too), you could easily fill every hour with social networking activities.

These sites do have a value in a business context; they can help you:

- Undertake your work by gaining advice, insight and experience from others.
- Spot career opportunities and position yourself as a strong candidate to new employers.
- Research potential contacts and

prospective clients.

- Widen your network of contacts.
- Keep in touch and add value to your network of clients and contacts.
- Promote yourself to prospective clients you know.
- Help potential clients and contacts, who you haven't yet been in touch with, to find you and make contact.

But if you're going to achieve these things, they need to be managed carefully.

To avoid wasting precious time and to gain a good return from your efforts, you need to be clear about why you're using them. With that in mind, you should then project-manage your social networking activities alongside your other marketing, sales, client management, fee-earning work and so on. That way you are more likely to gain the result you want from the time and energy you invest.

You are the product

Social networking sites shine a spotlight on you, your work, your interests, your network and what people think and say about you. You are the product here. But with your network's interaction with you also featured, this creates a visual portrayal of your personal reputation for others to see. The best reputations in the tax profession aren't left to chance – they are usually carefully managed.

In the past, practitioners typically built enviable reputations by:

- Defining a particular market they wanted to work in.
- Focusing on specific technical expertise or service deliverables they wanted to become synonymous with in that market.
- Ensuring the quality of their work, successes, market knowledge and commerciality stimulated client recommendations, introductions and new enquiries.
- Giving comments and/or articles to that market's press to publish.
- Presenting and/or networking at the market's key seminars, conferences and other events.

These activities rarely achieved their goal when they worked in isolation. In

combination, however, they often created powerful reputations that differentiated one professional from another and made them 'the' person to go to. The good news is that nothing has changed in this respect.

As one tax adviser from a regional practice recently told us: 'Social networking will help build your reputation to a certain degree. But it's best integrated with other communications and business development tools in your profile-building kit bag. It's all about having a plan. Decide what you personally want to become known for and then create a plan that mixes activities such as thought leadership, events, the social networks you interact with etc, to position that profile to people.'

So if you think social networking could help enhance your reputation and win business in a specific market, here are some key tips.

Start with your market or audience in mind

When building your profile or reputation, always have your audience or market in mind. They will ultimately be the judge of whether you are what you say you are. They can help build your reputation or they can ensure it never gets off the ground. So if you are looking to social networking to bring you business, think of the people who will bring in those leads. If your chosen market doesn't favour social networking, then invest your energies in activities they do use. If you are using these sites to get a new job, consider the firms or businesses you want to work for. With your target market or audience in mind, let *them* guide the content you place in your profile.

One tax professional, who has built a good reputation in the charity sector, told us: 'You have to think through the benefits you bring people and articulate these in your profile's content. Use language and terms they'd use rather than tax jargon or technical stuff. By articulating the benefits we brought to clients, I've gained a lot of attention from others in the sector. I've sometimes been flagged by search engines too, when people are looking for specialist advice.'

This tax consultant also carefully plans which groups, networks and people he profiles. 'I need to maintain my position as an expert in the charity sector,' he said, 'and so I always consider what contacts from the sector would find interesting. I

have many competitors and need to make my profile really connect with the people interacting with it. I diarise actions in Outlook to make me keep my profile page up to date and interesting.'

The power of recommendations

Endorsements are a great feature of social networking sites. Clients and contacts can recommend you and vice versa. One thing that surprises us is perhaps how shy we are in the UK about asking for that. At the same time, in our personal experience, we've found that people with good recommendations in their online profiles tend also to be great people to work with.

Once again, quality not quantity is a differentiator here. So if you've done a great piece of work for a client or contact, why not ask them to recommend you? Likewise, if you rate someone, then endorse them (they may reciprocate). Recommendations position your qualities in the words of the people who use you. This is far more powerful than any marketing blurb in your brochures or on your website. Also, in the current climate, people are invariably canvassing the opinion of others when looking to purchase something (this helps them mitigate the

SIMPLE THINGS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In helping professionals build their reputations and profile online, we offer seven tips for creating and managing your profile page:

1. Always opt to have your name in the URL (web address) of your social networking page – it helps search engines to find you.
2. Include your profile's URL in your email signature and on your website too, as this is popular with both people and search engines.
3. Complete all the information boxes that the social networking site gives you to create your page, but with your mind on what your network would be interested in.
4. Get a decent photo of yourself loaded up. It may cost a bit initially, but it can pay dividends in encouraging a potential client to make contact with you rather than a rival.
5. When populating your network, always go for quality rather than quantity.
6. With sites that send updates within each network, consider what you want that broadcast to reveal about you. Diarise to change 'what I've been up to' fairly regularly and ensure you use this opportunity to flag activities that will be interesting and may motivate others to contact you to find out more.
7. Even in the current climate, don't try and pose or answer questions to your network that present you as fishing for work or selling. Ask/answer questions in a way that demonstrates valuable insight and a genuine desire to help. People are really savvy, and spot disguised sales attempts. You'll lose your credibility fast if you venture down this route.

risk in their investment). It really does pay to make your recommendations accessible.

The heart of your network

Finally, in creating your online network, be professional. You conduct the quality of your network, so behave to others as you'd want them to behave to you. Help people with their challenges, facilitate relationships and assist where you can to help them win business. In doing so,

you'll find that the quality of the energy you inject into your network is reflected in the response you gain.

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