

LinkedIn Guide 2: Building a network

By now, you've hopefully had the chance to read the 'Getting set up on LinkedIn' guide, and have made some changes to improve your LinkedIn profile. So now that you have a profile that you're proud of, what do you do with it? Well, that's what this guide is all about – using your freshly polished digital asset to develop a valuable network of professionals... and hopefully prospects.

Why is networking on LinkedIn so important?

Why bother? It's a fair question. Our days are busy enough without adding an extra action to the list. But consider this. In terms of return on time invested, the potential value you can drive from effective networking on LinkedIn is huge. It's arguably one of the best uses of your time – especially as it takes almost no time at all.

Let's look at some of the benefits:

Time

Once you're up and running, dipping in and out of LinkedIn to reach out to your network can take moments. With an engaged network of clients and prospects, and some interesting content to share or comment on, it's an effective way to stay front of mind.

Ease

Networking online when compared to offline is so much easier. You don't have the morning rush to get to a breakfast meeting, and no one expects an elevator speech at the drop of a hat. These things still have a place. But LinkedIn is a safe environment where you can spend more time prepping responses and outreach messages.

Intelligence

Aside from the golf course, where else can you find out about a prospect's background; their interests; problems they're facing; outstanding questions you might be able to answer. LinkedIn is a place you can get the inside track on key issues faced by your network and by the very people with whom you're trying to connect.

Expertise

You may work for a company that already has a strong presence on LinkedIn – with marketing teams that regularly share content. So if you're looking for material to help you start a conversation or nurture a lead, LinkedIn should be your first port of call.

Reach

The maths on this varies from person to person, but if you have a network of c.500 connections, you can safely say the potential reach (or CTS for old school marketers) for anything you share is around c.5million.

Warmth

When the networking is done right, there is no such thing as a "cold contact" on LinkedIn. Once you've been an active member of a group, shared relevant content, and had someone check out your now gleaming profile, making that first attempt to connect will be so much smoother.

Brand

Effective networking on LinkedIn can help you develop both your own professional brand and the company's. Imagine a company post being 'liked' by 1000 employees. Reach aside; consider what a fantastically proud message that sends.

Know your audience. Know yourself.

Before we get into the practicalities of networking on LinkedIn, it's a good idea to develop an understanding of the segments of people that make up your network. Not every contact behaves in the same way and they'll likely fall into just one of the following segments:

Creators

People that originate content. You're marketing team is a source of creators. You might be one too. They fall into the following sub-categories:

Writers: Creators of original content. Thought leaders. Ruckus makers. Spokes people. The people you turn to for original industry insights.

Curators: Sharers of quality content, curated to suit their network. They know what you want to see and they deliver.

Conversationalists: Largely status and activity updates. Working on such-and-such. Going to so-and-so's event.

Critics/Commentators

One-step up from Conversationalists, these people are more likely to comment and review the content being originated by the above creators. When done right this can be highly effective. It's rarely just negative. Feedback can be expansive, creative, constructive. This is one of the best activities you can undertake. This is you adding value and your own slant on topics with which your network is engaging.

Spectators

They watch. Monitor activity. They might like a few posts, but little else. Being a spectator has its place when mining information or trying to get the gist of a group. But these types rarely network in the true sense of the word. Be a spectator when you need to spectate.

Collectors

Passive individuals that collect contacts but do nothing with them. Identified easily by the huge numbers of contacts and little else. Don't be this guy.

Joiners

Members of every social network under the sun. As well as every group within spitting, distance. Not necessarily active in either. Don't be this guy either.

Inactives

Put here for completion, but not relevant to LinkedIn. These people simply do not buy into all this technological hokum.

If you were this guy, you wouldn't be reading this.

Networking opportunities

Now that the benefits have been established and you know with whom you're networking, how do you actually... network?

Start a conversation

An "All-Star" profile only gets you so far. The way most people will get to your profile is through the activities you undertake. Conversations you start. Content you post. Questions you ask. It's important to be active. But being active doesn't necessarily take up much of your time. Depending on how much time you have, here are some small, medium and large options:

Small: Content curation

Hopefully your marketing team is already busy creating quality content to inform and entertain your clients. This content is regularly posted to LinkedIn. All you need to do to be a content curator is choose the posts most relevant to your audience, or to the conversations you're already having with clients, and hit 'share' ('like' the post too for good measure). This content is then shared via your profile to your network.

Medium: Content commentary

If you want to take your involvement in content curation up a notch, be a content commentator. When sharing content as above, write your own take on the topic being covered and add value and insight to the discussion. You might simply pull a key statistics from the post. You may want to reference how the subject affects your regions or specific companies that you work with. Adding value in this way is a great conversation starter.

Large: Publishing

Want to go all out and have your own voice heard. Fantastic. LinkedIn's publishing platform is the perfect environment for you to publish your own articles and insights designed to help, inform and entertain your network. And once published, it's forever present on your LinkedIn profile, further polishing your digital presence.

If you do want to become a publisher, your first port of call should be to check in with your marketing team. Not only can they give you insights and guidance on how to get the most out of the publishing platform, but also they can check what it is you intend to post, and check that it doesn't clash or duplicate anything already underway.

Explore existing communities

Having something interesting to say on a regular basis is half the battle. Finding an audience to be interested in what you have to say is the other, arguably easier part of the puzzle. Aside from the connections you make along the way, the two main places you'll find people to interact with are:

Companies

Makes sense right? The people you want to network with are employees or business owners. Most will have a company page. Some might even use it to post updates and tell their company's story. This is your opportunity to become part of the conversation.

A quick win here is playing to the needs of the company you are following by sharing their updates. This gives them extra reach and demonstrates how supportive you are of what they're doing. A great conversation starter.

Groups

Groups are interesting.

If you can find groups that focus on the specific sectors in which you operate – ones that may even include involvement from the people and organisations you are targeting – then you have yourself the inside track on the key issues affecting the people that matter most... clients and prospects.

Good groups are an amazing environment for lively debates on key industry issues, personal development and all sorts of other topics. We want you to be members of good groups.

Part of your success here will be in identifying a good group. The other is about listening to the conversations taking place and participating in them... not just posting your content and hoping it becomes the next viral sensation (see below "bad group"). Posting content is fine, so long as you're adding value to a conversation, answering a question, or using content to expand on a topic already in debate.

Bad groups aren't moderated and quickly become another channel where people dump their latest blog post with little thought for their audience and no interaction whatsoever.

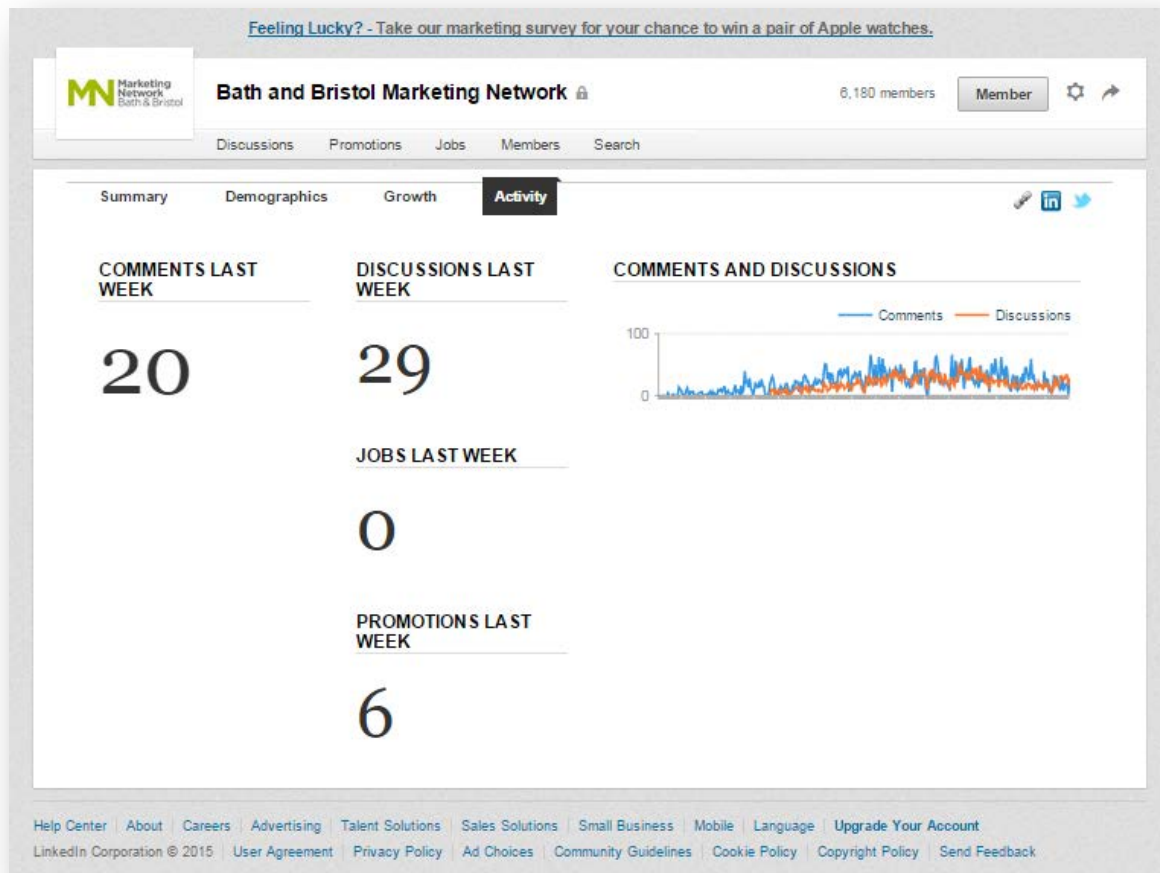
So how do you identify a good group?

Cue the technical bit

Identifying good groups

Have you found a group you want to get involved in? Follow these steps to check it's worth your while.

1. Navigate to the group home page
2. Click the cog icon that lives next to the member button
3. In the drop down click on group statistics
4. Hit the "Activity" tab and you'll be presented with the below screen



A discussion is someone starting a new thread by either asking a question or posting a piece of content. A comment is someone else commenting on said discussion. If you have many more discussions than you have comments, there is little to no interaction with the group, which means little or no conversations are taking place. That's a bad group.

If however, you have a close ratio between discussions and comments, what you should find is that people are engaging with the content and questions being posted. Lots more for you to listen to and interact with. A good group.

Further develop your profile

And finally, following on from the last guide; let's first take a further look at your profile and the networking opportunities it presents...

Recommendations

Proud of your work? Think you made an impact? Ask for some feedback in the shape of a recommendation. This is similar to the skills section but because it takes more effort than simply clicking a button, it's so much more valuable. And it's a great way of building a network of links showing whom you've worked with and what they thought of your work.

And it's a two way street. As a rule of thumb for every three recommendations you write, you'll get one back. But don't let this shape your efforts. Only write a recommendation if you mean what you say. The things you write about others say as much about you as the recommendation you receive.

Volunteering

This section simply allows you to articulate the types of causes you support and, if applicable, how you are involved with certain charitable organisations. Which is a great way of connecting like-minded individuals.

Projects

What projects are you proud of? Who made up the project team? What did you produce? The projects section of your profile is a great way of networking with colleagues new and old – celebrating the projects you have worked on together while at the same time presenting your collective efforts to anyone visiting either profile. Done right, this can lead to valuable new connections and introductions.

Publications

Have you had your work cited? Have you been quoted? Are you a regular contributor to a blog or forum? Using the publications section you can build a portfolio of links showing which publications you have worked with including a link to the content. This is great for embellishing your profile with real life examples and a great conversation starter.