

'Living In a Tech World' Column

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Social Networks 101

Hardly a day goes by without hearing about or in some way interacting with internet based social networks. They are usually the best known sites like MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn. There are also networking sites focused on particular groups, like families or areas of interest such as healthy or green living. A popular perception is that social networking is for teenagers and if it were still 2004 you would be pretty correct if you believed that. But times have changed rapidly and social networking has spread to all demographics and is quickly moving from an idle time endeavor to an important tool in keeping in touch with friends and family as well as an important business tool.

To impress you with an academic definition of social networking I'll snag this from Wikipedia; "A social network is a social structure made of nodes (which are generally individuals or organizations) that are tied by one or more specific types of interdependency, such as values, visions, ideas, financial exchange, friendship, sexual relationships, kinship, dislike, conflict or trade." A more accessible definition is: a place to connect and share with people of common interests.

Social networking has been around long before we started connecting by Internet. The early versions of AOL provided the ability to chat with people who seemed interesting or compatible from profiles they would post. They also provided chat rooms that were themed by interest or age of participants. But those were rudimentary compared to today's networking. Today's social networking is based on a structure that allows people to both express their individuality and share similar interests. This structure includes having profiles, friends, blog posts, widgets, and usually something unique to that particular social networking website.

If you find a site that want to be a part of the first thing you will do is complete a profile. This is where you tell the world about yourself. Profiles contain basic information, like where you live and how old you are, and personality questions, like who's your favorite actor and what's your favorite book. Social networks dedicated to a special interest will ask questions related to that.

Next you search for "Friends". Friends, or on some sites Connections, are an important part of the concept. Your friends will be allowed to see your profile and anything you post. When you join, most sites will help you match your contact lists to the sites memberships list so that you can invite friends to 'follow' you. If there is no match they will send emails to a list of your existing contacts to join the site.

In addition to linking up with known contacts or people with six degrees of separation from you there are also 'groups'. Groups allow you to connect to strangers that have similar interest like gardening, coupon clipping or just about anything you can think of. A group can be anything from "Marble Falls High Class of '78" to "People Who like Books" to "Mothers of Invention Fans".

When you join a group you can share in the interaction between users in the form of discussions. Most social networking websites support discussion boards for the groups, and many also allow members of the group to post pictures, music, video clips, and other tidbits related to the group.

Another feature of some social networks is the ability to create your own blog entries. Blogging through a social network is perfect for keeping people informed on what you are up to.

Some of the websites that you may explore are the previously mentioned **MySpace** (<http://www.myspace.com/>), **Facebook** (<http://www.facebook.com/>) and **LinkedIn** (<http://www.linkedin.com/>) which is general but focused on making business connections. Some of the more targeted sites include **Care2** which is the largest online community for healthy and green living, human rights and animal welfare. (<http://www.care2.com/>). **Flixster** is the place to share movie reviews and movie ratings with your friends. (<http://www.flixster.com/>). **Multiply** is a secure, family-friendly media sharing site (<http://multiply.com/>). And there is **Eons** (<http://www.eons.com/>) which describes itself as the online community for boomers or for people "lovin' life on the flip side". When exactly did 'boomer' become synonymous with old folks? Personally I liked it better when it was always preceded with "baby".

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