

# Do's and Don'ts of Online / Social Networking (Personal Branding)

As with face-to-face networking, there are many written and unwritten rules of behavior related to online networking. Many of the rules of traditional networking apply in online networking, but connecting with people virtually does add some new rules to the familiar ones. To help you navigate appropriately, we've outlined some of the rules for online networking.

## Do's of Online Networking

### Set networking objectives and milestones

One of the first things you'll want to be clear about are your goals for networking online. Are you actively job searching? Just want to increase your networking activity? Looking for information? Your objectives should determine which online networking approaches you take and how much time you spend on this.

### Assess your skills, talents, experience and work style to convey your personal brand and unique selling points

What is the message or "brand" that you want to promote? Understanding this will ensure that your online identity is accurate and consistent across all sites.

### Develop a profile for online networks and other online media

Although sites differ somewhat from each other, the basic components of a profile are the same: a summary statement, work experience, educational credentials, professional affiliations and sometimes personal interests and hobbies. Assembling all of this information in one file or folder will simplify and speed the process of joining online networking sites. Updating your CV is the easiest place to start. Your CV serves as the basis for content for most online professional networking. Once you have a version of your CV you can easily copy and paste it into any online form.

### Watch the conversation before jumping in

Most online networking sites and forums have their own policies, procedures and rules of engagement. When you first join a site take some time to watch the interaction before offering opinions, uploading content, and engaging others. Once you understand the flow of dialogue, you'll be better able to contribute to the community in a positive way.

## **Facilitate introductions**

As part of a large online networking community, you will be asked to facilitate introductions and help other people connect. If you feel comfortable making an introduction then do so. If not, tell your contact you don't know the person well and that you'd rather not. Helping people make connections online is a more fluid process than in traditional networking settings with less responsibility for ensuring that these would be mutually beneficial connections than in face-to-face networking.

## **Focus on relationship-building**

Online or offline, networking is about building relationships. You should never be networking with people only because you think they can give you a job or will become clients. The focus should always be on building relationships. New jobs and new clients are often multiple networking levels away from that initial encounter. The more networking you do and the more connections you make, the closer you come to that new job or next client. You will have found many opportunities to assist others with their networking goals along the way. Networking is always a two-way street.

## **Assess your online identity from time to time**

Set up a Google Alert to track online mentions of your name. If you find anything negative or unflattering, you'll need to clean up your "digital dirt." There are strategies to use if you encounter a problem and there are even some services to help you with more serious digital dirt issues.

## **Don'ts of Online Networking**

### **Don't forget your manners**

Think about how you would network with someone face-to-face. These same rules apply in online networking settings. For example, don't "wear out your welcome" by making too many requests, be considerate of others' time, and always express thanks and a willingness to give back.

### **Don't be selfish**

Remember that networking is a two-way street. You need to give before you get; help other people. Don't just be looking selfishly at how you can benefit from the interaction.

### **Don't try to achieve too much too fast**

You wouldn't walk up to someone at an initial face-to-face meeting and say "here's my CV....hand it to everyone you meet", so, don't do that online either. Although interactions online are quick, you still need to build the relationships. Wait for a second or third communication for special requests.

### **Don't have unrealistic expectations**

Don't expect something good from every connection. Just as in live networking settings, not every contact is a helpful contact. Expect that in online circles as well.

### **Don't put any private or sensitive information on online networking sites**

Don't put anything on a blog, discussion group or networking site that you wouldn't want your boss to see or wouldn't want to have publicised on national news. Be careful! Make sure that your brand is consistent and positive across all sites.

It's not good to have a rowdy, partying image on Facebook and a professional profile on LinkedIn. Both will come up in a Google search of your name, and even if they can't fully access your information on those sites, they will be able to see some information and may wonder who you really are.

Consider blogging, tweeting and joining or starting discussion groups.