

# Taking Business Networking To A NEW LEVEL

BY JEAN KELLEY



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**F**or any business, effective networking is an essential component to success. Today, though, the landscape of business networking has changed dramatically. No longer does business networking exclusively involve standing in a crowded room of people, meeting and greeting with total strangers, and exchanging numerous business cards. While such traditional networking is still valid and effective, e-networking done via business social networking sites is just as valuable.

## To get business from your e-networking activities, you have to contribute meaningful content.



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Regardless of what anyone thinks about social networking sites, the fact is that they are here to stay. Sure, they'll evolve over the years and will likely look very different than they do today, but ultimately they'll still exist. And while purely "social" social networking sites can have a business aspect to them, it's important for business owners, executives, and managers to have a strong presence on the tried and true business networking sites (example: LinkedIn).

Why? Because your clients, customers, colleagues, and others look to business networking sites for evidence of your character. For example, when a prospect is thinking about conducting business with you, he or she will likely perform a social media search for you. Never before did average people have the ability to research anyone or any company they wanted. While in the past background checks were expensive and time-consuming, these days a few mouse clicks and keystrokes can pull up a goldmine

of information. That's why you and your company need to occupy business networking sites — and you need to be using the e-networking sites effectively.

The following suggestions will help you become a savvy e-networker with a positive online presence.

### **Don't Be a Contact Collector, Be a Contact Cultivator**

The goal of any networking endeavor is to build relationships, not just to collect business cards. E-networking is no different. If you've been on any business networking sites, you've likely seen people with 500+ connections. At first you may think, "Wow, that person sure knows a lot of people." But does he or she really know those connections? Or is this person just collecting contacts?

Rather than accepting and sending invitations to anyone, be mindful of whom you connect with. When you do make a connection with someone, look over his or her

profile and then add a personal note to the person where you indicate a shared interest, club, affiliation, etc. For example, you could respond to someone by writing, "I see you attended Northwestern University (or are a member of the Miami Business Association, or have a pet beagle...). I have a similar interest in that I (also attended Northwestern...am a member of the Tulsa Business Association...have a dog named Snoopy...etc.). You get the idea. Find a shared interest to build upon that will make you stand out and open the lines for real communication later.

### **Have a Clear Purpose**

Many people think they're going to get business from being on social media sites. While you can get business from your online activities, this shouldn't be your ultimate purpose. Rather, your purpose should be to make people aware of who you are by sharing your expertise.

Any business networking site is

a place for you to give, not just to get. So to get business from your e-networking activities, you have to contribute meaningful content. You can find many groups to belong to that have strong conversations going. If you post something in the discussion that's smart and useful (good content), then chances are someone will ask to connect with you. Now you have more people to share your message with.

Other examples of good content are asking thought-provoking questions, posting a motivational quote, and sharing a business tip. No matter what you post, if you get a reply, acknowledge the person for their feedback or contribution. Just as you can't take people for granted in the brick and mortar world, you can't take them for granted in the virtual world either. Everyone who reacts to your content is a potential relationship and you need to treat them as such.

When you're replying to a question someone else poses, try to answer in the early part of the conversation rather than after 100 others have already replied. You

want your answer to be in that first page of results. That way anyone who replies after you sees your photo and business information every time. With that said, pay close attention to what the question is and don't answer anything capriciously. Always remember that your reply is posted forever.


### Add Some Personal Flair to Your Profile

Even though this is business, it's okay to put some personal flair to your profile. After all, no one is all business all the time. Chances are you have some interesting hobbies or other areas of your life that people find intriguing. For example, maybe you collect antique cars, breed prize-winning poodles, tend a vineyard in your backyard, or have the city's largest yo-yo collection. These are interesting tidbits of yourself that you can weave into your profile to make you appear more "real."

Additionally, look at the tools and widgets the business networking sites make available to you and

use them. You can do such things as post your reading list, link your blog, upload your Twitter feed, and many others. People can get to know you by these additional applications. Even better, they're very user-friendly and easy to integrate into your business networking persona.

### A New Twist on an Old Tool

We are currently in the biggest social media experiment in the world. Those who embrace business e-networking now are essentially the pioneers who will shape how this tool gets implemented and how it evolves. As you move forward, however, remember that your involvement with business networking sites should be just one small aspect of your business building efforts; it's definitely not an end-all approach for getting business. Essentially, when you use today's business e-networking tools effectively, you'll have one more way to connect with clients and prospects so you can build your business and boost your bottom line. 

**Jean Kelley** is president and founder of Jean Kelley Leadership Consulting and Jean Kelley Leadership Alliance. She works with corporate leaders all over the world to achieve their highest potential. With her Alliance, she has helped more than 500,000 businesspeople enhance their careers. She is the author of *Dear Jean: What They Don't Teach You at the Water Cooler* and *Get A Job; Keep A Job Handbook*. For more information, please visit [www.jeankelley.com](http://www.jeankelley.com).

