



# Social networking

## What are social networks?

Social Networks are in some ways the most chaotic and difficult to grasp parts of the Live Web... and therein lies their potential. Sites like Facebook, MySpace and Bebo allow users to create their own pages. Some like MySpace and Bebo allow anyone online to see the personal sites, others like Facebook only allow other members to view the pages. These networks are built around the idea of 'friends'. Your page is a place where your friends (real or virtual) can connect with you and you with them. You can exchange messages, play games, swap music and videos etc. Pages on social networks are part self-expression and part bulletin board for conversations. And that's where they start to get interesting.

## Which one to use?

Different social networks have different atmospheres and different communities. Bebo tends to be for younger teens, MySpace has a lot of musicians and wannabee artists while Facebook is increasingly popular with young adult professionals. There are even networks such as LinkedIn that cater for the business networking market. What happens when people of similar ages and cultures get together on these networks is that they find common interests and make new 'friends' who share an interest in a particular film director or band or social issue. The social networks encourage their members to form groups around these common interests and often provide tools for them to do so. These can include applications like calendars or alerts to help organise or online polls and recommendation tools to get other people interested.

## Why join in?

People who spend a lot of time on social networks have lots of connections and are involved in lots of online activities. A typical user might be a member of a number of groups, be in messaging contact with real world and virtual friends and be regularly posting words, pictures and links to their social network Blog. Social networks are a little like parties with conversations starting and stopping, relationships created and ideas and stories exchanged. This is potentially very powerful for a campaigner or fundraiser looking to make new contacts or get interest going. These networks are social, their users pride themselves on connections, friends and conversations. Consequently they are particularly useful spaces to spread ideas or

generate enthusiasm. You can of course join any or all of these networks as an individual or an organisation. Be prepared however to invest quite a bit of time. Others on the networks will find you and your interests and invite you to become friends. Of course this is great in terms of making contacts and possibly widening the organisations reach but maintaining active social network presences can be intensive.

### Do they work?

The other way in which you can make use of social networks is to make use of the 'power of crowds'. Chances are that someone in your organisation or your family already has a social network page. As part of the community they are in an ideal place to become the ambassador for your organisation and its issue. You could ask them to include a badge on their page that says that they support you. They could write on their Blog about your issue or they could raise a question and ask people to vote on it. If they were really keen they could start (or join) a group. These could be short-lived; maybe leading up to a march or event, or longer-term; raising awareness, discussing or campaigning. Chances are these social networkers will be 'digital natives' and so will also be using YouTube and Flickr etc so they will be able to bring other media together. A final advantage of using these ambassadors is that they will know how to 'speak' and interact in these spaces. They will be able to exploit the network potential to the full. One thing to note about the Live Web in general and social networks in particular is that these spaces and the relationships they generate are unpredictable. You may start a conversation off but, like in the real world, you have no say in where that goes or what others do with the idea. Again this can be very powerful. Supporters may take an issue and create a whole new fundraising idea that catches on and brings in all sorts of new supporters. Great! But they might also take an issue and change the focus or even the point. You can of course dissociate your organisation from that shift but the conversation will continue. One advantage of trying to build a network of social network ambassadors is that they can help to keep the conversation going in the direction you want it to.

## Pro's and Con's

### pro's

- Free
- The biggest party you'll ever be invited to. There **MUST** be people who can help you out there
- Passionate and active community of users, many of whom are politically and socially active
- Can take on a creative life of its own
- Very high-profile at the moment... lot of potential media coverage.

### con's

- Can be intimidating for first timer
- Can be time consuming. If you're playing there, set yourself targets and time limits and let your networks know
- Can be fickle. What is fashionable to talk about today may not be tomorrow
- Difficult to get tone of voice right
- Impossible to control

## Getting started

- Visit sites that don't require registration to view (most except Facebook) and look at the sorts of conversations online. Search for relevant groups and postings
- Find out if any of your supporters (or their children!) are already involved. Ask for their advice or enlist as ambassadors
- Decide which networks to work with
- Set clear aims and time limits e.g. get signatures for an online petition, recruit for event, get ideas for new schools pack



- Create an account on your chosen networks. Make sure the name is relevant and attractive
- Look for groups on the network you can join before starting a new one
- Regularly review what your presence on the networks is achieving.

### Top Tips

- Have clear aims and time limits. Evaluate regularly
- Make use of 'digital natives' to be your ambassadors. Be sure to support them
- Don't try and be something you're not. Be human and use your real passionate voice
- Don't worry if your space is not all about work. People might connect with you because of your love of knitting and then get involved in campaigning on climate change
- Find ways to integrate the online and offline worlds. Invite your 'friends' to your events or arrange to meet on the march
- Connect your social network page to your other Live Web work e.g. your photos on Flickr, your favourite videos on YouTube etc.

### What next?

We're here to help. Visit [www.mediatrust.org/get-support](http://www.mediatrust.org/get-support) to find out how. Access free downloadable digital resources, including expert tips on everything from blogging to analytics. Get free, professional support for your media, marketing or communications projects. With Community Newswire, our free-to-use service in partnership with the Press Association, see your news stories hit the headlines. While our packed calendar of half and full-day training seminars and workshops is sure to inspire, equip and empower you to transform your communications. We've got everything you need to get your voice heard.