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Social networking sites help businesses spread their message

Think twice before dumping those e-mail invites to join LinkedIn or Facebook. Local observers say those social networking sites may be just what your business needs to survive the recession.

Businesspeople are increasingly discovering that these invites, which they may have once considered spam, may be a great source of leads and new customers. Surging interest in social media sites showed at a recent North Las Vegas Chamber event. The organization preregistered a record 110 attendees for a recent breakfast meeting at Santa Fe Station to discuss social networking sites' ever-increasing business uses.

The event was part of a string of social-networking presentations across the valley; the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce hosted a subsequent discussion on the topic.

The turnout at the North Las Vegas Chamber's Feb. 4 event made the event the most popular chamber breakfast in recent memory, said Sharon Powers, who has been the organization's president and chief executive officer for nine years.

The economic downturn and social media's uses as an inexpensive marketing and networking tool are big draws, said Powers, who had her own reasons for attending the meeting.

"I needed to figure out how to use LinkedIn," she said. "I've been on it for a while, but I've just been clicking on people's invites."

Guest speaker Cheryl Bella, senior vice president of The Firm Public Relations and Marketing, dissected Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn. She told the audience how to use the sites to share information and discuss business. Bella's



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TAMI BELT, OWNER OF BLUE CUBE MARKETING SOLUTIONS, USED THE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE LINKEDIN IN HER HOME OFFICE. OBSERVERS SAY ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS CAN HELP BUSINESSES PROMOTE THEMSELVES.



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talk also introduced many audience members to the microblogging site Twitter.

Twitter lets people and groups follow other firms or individuals, and receive short updates in "tweets," messages 140 characters or fewer.

The New York Times reported April 14 that Twitter has 14 million users; on Dec. 3 the paper had reported the service had 6 million users. The Times also said Twitter users had visited twitter.com 99 million times during March.

"The U.S. Department of State uses Twitter," Bella said. "So, do you think you should be on there?"

Twitter can be a first step when wading into social media, Bella said.

"Twitter is the easiest," she said, "because you don't have to upload a lot of personal information, but you can upload other businesses and see the way they are using it."

According to The New York Times, San Francisco-based Twitter has raised \$55 million from several venture capitalists during the recession. An April 3 article in Sci-Tech Today valued the company at \$500 million.

Facebook offered to buy the microblogging site for \$500 million in Facebook stock last year, but Twitter rejected the offer. Earlier this month, TechCrunch reported that search giant Google was in talks to acquire Twitter.

Although Twitter has business potential, companies and entrepreneurs shouldn't get delusions of grandeur, Bella said; Twitter users shouldn't assume others will find their tweets interesting enough to follow.

"People care if the CEO of Zappos (who uses Twitter) is stuck in a snowstorm in an airport, because he runs a Fortune 500 company," she said. "But (they may not care) if the owner of a small business is stuck in a snowstorm."

The Firm used Twitter in its marketing campaign for Earth Hour Las Vegas. The local event was part of a national promotion the World Wildlife Federation staged March 28.

If Twitter can promote businesses and events, LinkedIn can promote businesspeople, or people hoping to be in business. Bella said employment advisers now tell people looking for, or barely keeping, jobs to use the site to scout prospects.

"LinkedIn is interesting because it is about not just promoting a company but promoting yourself," Bella said. "So any company can use it as a marketing tool."

Bella uses LinkedIn herself; she gathers business cards at meetings and later invites the people behind the cards to join her on the site. Continuous updates on LinkedIn alert users when someone starts a new company or changes jobs.

Public relations company owner Tami Belt attended the North Las Vegas event and said she has a healthy respect for social networking's potential.

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She uses Facebook, Twitter and Plaxo Pulse for mostly personal contacts, but mixes in some shop talk and promotions. Belt said LinkedIn was unexpectedly profitable for her company, Blue Cube Marketing Solutions.

"LinkedIn is the most business-oriented," Belt said. "I got a client from LinkedIn. I was just linked to someone they knew, and they needed a marketing firm."

Facebook can be used to promote companies; Henderson-based Pie Town Pizza has some 200 "friends" on its Facebook page. Bella said even as companies cut costs they can often find someone in-house interested in updating a company's profile and sending updates.

Bella added, though, that businesses using Facebook must be careful not to violate the site's anti-spamming rules.

Although she touted Facebook and LinkedIn, Bella was less enthusiastic about MySpace. That site, she said, would have limited appeal to business users, unless those users were 19-year-old consumers.

However, MySpace has been working to become more commercial. On March 31, the social networking giant teamed with the online guide Citysearch to announce the launch of MySpace Local. MySpace called the new feature, which was scheduled to show up on MySpace sometime this month, a "social directory of small-business profiles."

Potential customers see social networking's power. A new online survey released this month by marketing agency Prodo showed that 86 percent of consumers believe companies should use social networking techniques in marketing.

Powers said social media's importance became obvious after a recent trip to Carson City to talk to state lawmakers.

"I found out a lot of legislators are on Facebook," Powers said. "... And I find that quite interesting because I thought that was really linked to 20-year-olds, but these legislators are not 20 years old."

Contact reporter Valerie Miller at vmiller@lvbusinesspress.com or 702-387-5286.

How much is it worth?

Publicist Tami Belt uses the microblogging site Twitter to promote charitable causes and her business clients while keeping in touch with friends. But she may soon be charged to do the first two.

Founders of the popular site are debating a plan to charge commercial users, leaving local business people split on whether the now-free service would be worth the extra cost.

In February, Twitter co-founder Biz Stone told the British trade magazine Marketing that his company was considering charging the growing number of businesses that use the service for marketing.

Belt, the owner of Blue Cube Marketing Solutions, may be typical of professionals who use Twitter personally and professionally. She generates buzz and "followers" for clients with Twitter. But part of the site's appeal is it is free, just as Facebook, LinkedIn and other social networking sites are.

"I don't have a public profile, but I wouldn't pay as a commercial user if I did go public," she said.

There's so far no plan to charge people who use the site for customer service and marketing. A company's appetite to pay for Twitter may be tempered by the extent of microblog's commercial use. Some mixed users of Twitter may not feel that it is cost-effective; such is the case with Belt.

"No, I don't know that I do enough on it to make it worth paying to go commercial," she said. "I could still do LinkedIn."

Cheryl Yeley, the owner of the newly opened Moxie Java coffee shop on West Cheyenne Avenue, is a new Twitter user. She wants to see whether the site can generate interest in her startup and she is not ruling out paying for the service.

"Being a small business, advertising is a huge cost for me," she said. "If it was \$30 or \$50 a month, I don't know. I'd like to measure it to see if I get enough feedback; and if I don't get enough feedback, I don't want to throw away my money."

And there is also a limit on what Yeley would pay to tweet.

"If it was more than \$50 a month, I really couldn't do it," she said.

A middle ground for charging might be reached said social networking analyst Cheryl Bella, a publicist with The Firm Public Relations and Marketing and a frequent speaker on the topic. Users, she said, could accept charging for upgraded and new services, as LinkedIn now does. Taking away existing free privileges, though, could cause backlash and flight to other sites, she added.

"Otherwise, people will say, 'I am getting this for free and you'd better not take it away from me.'"

-- Valerie Miller