

Business needs to embrace the new media

Rather than something to be feared by business, social media presents a wealth of opportunities.



Lauren Brunovs

IF you're from the top end of town, your primary knowledge of Facebook will in all likelihood be that the IT department has been instructed to block it. You probably do not see any downside to this. However, a significant proportion of your staff would be acutely aware of this limitation placed on them.

Facebook has more than 400 million active users worldwide and in March this year surpassed Google-related sites in both the number of visits and the time spent on the sites. So, your staff are probably using it on their smartphones anyway. What are you missing out on? What is it that makes it so popular?

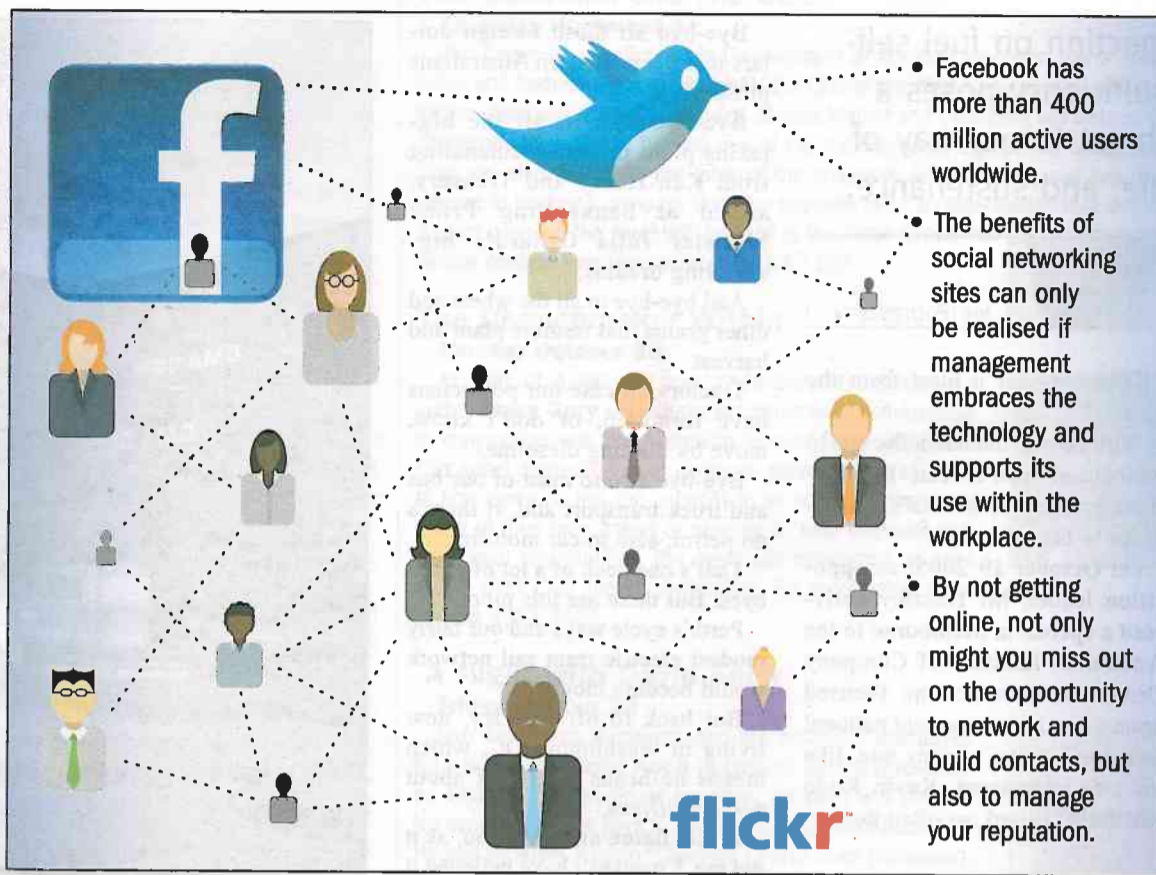
Rapidly replacing many other forms of communication, social media is now the way to keep in touch. Better yet, it is a vicarious way to maintain a passive knowledge of what is happening in your extended network of friends. Face-to-face contact may be

becoming rarer by the day as these tools now provide an all-in-one capability to contact a wide network of people, coordinate events, share photos and even chat online in real time, so you still feel connected.

Perhaps if you are contacting clients or colleagues you will still revert to sending an email, but if you are trying to stay in tune with friends or even your kids without seeming to interfere, you'll probably 'Facebook' them.

In this increasingly digital era, Facebook is a highly visual medium that intrinsically creates awareness. As the coming generations grow and age, eventually filling the workplace, it may be this type of interaction that they understand and respond to best.

Many small businesses have achieved success through Facebook, their brand going viral, with its capability for contacts to indicate they 'like' a product instantly spreading a brand across their entire network. Facebook offers the ability to set up a free group page for your company and, upon inviting people into your network, to keep them up to date with whatever information you see fit and ultimately directing traffic to your own website. Status updates drive the 'news feed' of your friends, so if it is interesting enough and someone takes action or comments (and someone actually wants to be your friend), it will get shared across their



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networks. The sharing of information is instant, passive and viral, and costs virtually nothing but time.

Marketing opportunities for niche brands may be an obvious benefit of Facebook for small business, but what is the benefit for multinational companies, particularly such as those in resources, so predominant in WA?

With a significant number of people in WA now working away for extended periods, Facebook can help alleviate the social and professional isolation often associated with this. When hiring, you can highlight this as a point of difference and also develop a sense of trust and empowerment by allowing access to employees, particularly influencing the choice of those from younger generations who may be considering a career the resources sector.

While many companies discipline employees for their use of social networking sites during work time, many perceive opportunities and realise the inherent value that these tools provide. HR departments might now be checking Facebook pages as part of their vetting process, which in itself raises some ethical questions as the concept of private-versus-public information is becoming blurred by technology. Alternatively, there is the potential for HR to utilise the targeting capability of Facebook to advertise job opportunities to those within the desired demographic, or create a group specifically for those looking for work within the company, regularly updating career information and prospects. They could also create a group that keeps in touch with vacation students, the office social club or those involved in the graduate program, using a medium they are familiar with but also won't feel pestered by. It makes an interesting alternative to an office newsletter, bulk emails or notices left on the board in the lunchroom.

However, the benefits of social networking sites can only be realised if management embraces the technology and supports its use within the workplace. You should expect to see a normal distribution of use; there will be some who abuse the privilege and others who don't use it at all. However, if management employs normal risk management and implements appropriate controls, employees will be aware their internet use is monitored and will be utilising Facebook at the same level as any other communication device, mitigating any detrimental impacts to productivity.

As with any marketing effort it is important to understand the medium before starting a campaign.

Bombarding contacts with press releases and corporate information may repel rather than attract them. Focus needs to be on what your network is really expecting to gain from the relationship, engaging with your contacts and providing content with value. Groups need to be actively maintained and monitored or you may find inappropriate posts aimed at doing damage to your brand.

By not getting online, not only might you miss out on the opportunity to network and build contacts, but also to manage your reputation. Businesses should consider the need to equal the online presence of those communicating negatively, using the same media, so as to create a balance. Through creating a group you control, you can control the quality of the information divulged and also control the quality of the people you

Facebook can help alleviate the social and professional isolation often associated with long periods working away from home.

are networked with. You can direct your communications to those who are subscribed as interested and also have the opportunity to support or rebuke statements made by others in an instant.

It is unlikely the social media phenomenon, for which Facebook is now the poster child, is going to disappear any time soon. There are benefits for business to be found if you can take a positive thought-based approach to its use. Rather than simply blocking it, consider using it as a tool for recruitment or as an employee benefit, or to build on your brand image and create a better sense of trust with not only your employees but all your stakeholders.

• Lauren Brunovs is consultant at Oyster Consulting, a WA-based management consultancy which specialises in strategies for the resources industry.

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