

If you're hesitant about using social media

for business, don't worry: I was, too. Having worked only for very large firms since leaving university, I'd always stuck to the rules of their corporate communications departments. I knew the formal procedures that had to be followed and how public messages had to be delivered in the corporate voice, but all that structure vanished when I left Morgan Stanley to start my own business. While I knew it was important to embrace the "net generation" tools at my disposal, I was concerned that some of them would require me to speak in my own voice. It felt like something I needed, rather than wanted, to do. Now I'm a huge fan, so what's changed?

I started with LinkedIn. If you're unfamiliar with it, think of it as the professional version of Facebook: an enhanced online CV and/or virtual shopfront. It lets you post your details and allows colleagues and clients to provide references. While LinkedIn's membership is dwarfed by Facebook's, it has grown from 47 million to 80 million in the past year. Before I left Morgan Stanley, my LinkedIn profile listed only my name, my employer and a dozen contacts. I'd been unable to access it from work, so logging on to accept invites required me to use my home PC – something I'd been loath to do after 12 hours at the office. But without the Morgan Stanley brand I was just Linda. I needed to create my own brand, so I could ignore LinkedIn no longer.

If you're thinking about taking the plunge on LinkedIn, I'd suggest that you start by considering how others would read your profile. If your ideal client were looking to hire someone with your skills, would your profile encourage it to approach you? People are cynical about the fact that LinkedIn requires your approval for testimonials to be posted (so you can decline any comments you don't like). But, if you were presented with two similar profiles and one had no recommendations and the other had many, which would you prefer?

As I built my profile I realised how social media is a wonderful research source. I now routinely read the web sites, blogs and profiles of contacts before approaching them for the first time. Every conversation where I've had these social media insights has gone better than any conversation I've had without them – I call it social business intelligence. Time can be saved and conversations made more relevant when you already know someone's areas of interest and mutual



WORKING AT TWEET

Social networking can be business networking. **Linda Cheung** FCMA reveals what it's done for her start-up.

connections. Relationships that might have taken years to build can now form in a matter of months, sometimes even weeks. Its value to my business has been undeniable. And, as the benefits accumulated, I became more aware of how others might be using this intelligence. Whether you're on board with social media or not, be aware that others are.

To make the most of LinkedIn you need to provide links to your corporate web site, blog etc. If your firm doesn't have a corporate profile, create one and encourage all staff to link to it. And make your public profile your own – for the highest possible ranking in Google, customise your public profile URL to <http://linkedin.com/in/yourfullname>. If this is

already taken, add a full stop between your first and last name or use your middle initial.

Also keep your contacts informed about what you're doing. Think of LinkedIn's status box as the equivalent of Facebook's "What's on your mind?" field. Announcing what events you're attending, say, can lead to questions, opportunities and "I'm going too; let's meet up" responses. Blogs keep people updated on what's important to you, which can help them better understand their need for your services and/or how they can help you. Engaging, rather than broadcasting, is the key to social media. It's about being where your colleagues, clients and competitors are. Facebook has not been a priority for me



The geek shall inherit the Earth: *The Social Network* tells how Facebook became the key global social forum for millions of people (main photo). Linda Cheung (inset) found that LinkedIn and Twitter do just as much for business.

because its business use is still largely B2C, rather than B2B. But, if your customers are on there, that's where you'll need to be.

LinkedIn has recently increased its emphasis on group discussions, company profiles, products and services. It has also given users the ability to "follow" individuals, organisations and conversations, which leads us nicely on to Twitter, the so-called micro-blogging service. People use it to send and read others' messages, which are called tweets. As a user you can subscribe to other users' tweets (which are restricted to 140 characters in length). This is known as following – and subscribers are known as followers. Unlike Facebook contacts and

LinkedIn connections, those you follow and those who follow you can be different. For example, the comedian Stephen Fry (@stephenfry), who has been a keen Twitter user since 2008, follows 53,000 people and is followed by 1.92 million people.

Numerous "experts" offering related advice services for LinkedIn and Twitter have emerged, but, while no one stands out for me on the LinkedIn side, I can recommend a social media guide for Twitter called Mashable (www.mashable.com; @mashable). This follows 2,000 people and is followed by 2.12 million. My own tip for corporate tweeting is: don't delegate the task to a junior member of staff – in the same way that you'd select appropriate representatives for your organisation at a corporate drinks reception, say, choose carefully for the virtual equivalent.

I was initially more wary about Twitter than I was about LinkedIn. I was afraid of its immediacy and how I might come across within 140 characters. And, with my corporate background, I was acutely aware of the dangers of making inappropriate comments. But I also realised that a personal touch was necessary and, when I decided to share my experiences of starting a business, the aspect I most feared soon became what I liked the most. For example, when pondering whether to register the name of my business as a trademark or not, I received several tweets describing followers' experiences, tips pointing to free online resources and even advice from intellectual property lawyers. (A couple of the lawyers were unabashed about selling their services – who'd have thought that they could be so innovative?) It was eye-opening to me to realise what a broad, insightful and helpful community I had joined on this virtual network. And the 140-character limit on each tweet meant that there was no room for people to waffle.

This realisation was reinforced when my firm's co-founder, Mark Bower, and I were preparing to go to a conference. A week before the event he wrote a post on his blog mentioning that we'd be attending, including the "hash tag" that we would use on Twitter to share updates with followers who couldn't

make it to the event. In Twitter a hash tag is a way to identify tweets on a specific topic – so called because it starts with the # character. We then both posted links on LinkedIn and Twitter to his post.

Think of blogs as the hub for all your content – Google favours regularly updated sites, so frequent blogging helps to keep your corporate web site high in the search-engine rankings. Use blogs when you have opinions, insights or expertise to share. Use Twitter and LinkedIn to drive readers to your blog by posting eye-catching headlines for them. Research shows that tweets containing the word "blog" are re-tweeted far more than normal tweets are, which means that the information reaches a much wider audience.

Some of our followers got in touch to say they were also attending and suggested meeting up. Others spread news of the hash tag so that their followers were aware of our updates. Some of these followers of followers started following us directly, adding to our network of contacts. As the use of the hash tag grew, it highlighted other relevant people for us to connect with, including speakers and journalists. Our broad, insightful and helpful social media community was growing with every tweet.

The ROI crystallised when I tweeted to criticise keynote speakers and panellists for failing to live up to their "thought leader" billings. I started receiving virtual introductions such as: "Make sure you meet @[name] – he's at the conference today and really is a thought leader." It struck me how real-time introductions were no longer restricted to those physically in the room. All parties were being validated by a trusted mutual contact; they could look up each other's profiles and photos and confidently stroll up to someone who'd been a complete stranger moments before. What were those fears about real-time, 140-character communication again?

Linda Cheung (@LindaCheungUK) is CEO of Connectegrity (www.connectegrity.com). She helps professional services firms to grow by integrating blue-chip best practices with net generation tools.

Further information

CIMAsphere is the institute's global online community for management accountants. Visit <http://community.cimaglobal.com> to join it.