

# Key issue

## Social networking



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### What is a social network?

With the rise of social software in recent years, it is likely that most readers will have heard of, or even be registered with, one or more of the popular social networking sites (think Facebook<sup>1</sup>, MySpace<sup>2</sup>, LinkedIn<sup>3</sup>, Bebo<sup>4</sup>). These sites provide users with an off-the-peg online presence; registration is free and involves building a profile of basic personal details, along with anything from qualifications to preferred musical acts, hobbies to employment history, depending on the target demographic and objectives of the chosen service. The core function of such sites is to link these users together to form social networks based either on who they know (profiles of friends or contacts can be located by searching on name, e-mail address, etc.) or on aspects of their profile (potential 'friends' are suggested based on similarities from research interests to ranking of preferred superhero powers). Interaction between contacts is enabled through a variety of media – video, voice and text-based messaging.

### Who uses social networks?

The major social networks have seen remarkable growth in usage in recent years. (Facebook now claims over 43 million active users, up from 12 million in December 2006.) High numbers of regular users, particularly those that can be precisely segmented based on comprehensive profile information, are lucrative targets for sales and advertising campaigns. Each service has developed a distinct userbase: LinkedIn has cornered the professional

market; Bebo is strong amongst younger teenagers, Facebook leads in higher education; Rupert Murdoch's MySpace is arguably more commercial (record label EMI creates and maintains a MySpace page for all its artists) while Google's Orkut<sup>5</sup> is said to be particularly popular in Brazil<sup>6</sup>.

### How are social networks being used in our industry?

Since Facebook relaxed its membership policies last year (it had previously prohibited organizations from creating profiles), several university and college libraries have created a presence in order to reach out to student patrons in their own environment. Libraries have integrated applications within their Facebook pages that enable users to search catalogues and ask reference questions. But they have also extended their offering beyond this replication of physical library services, for example setting up groups like 'Awesome Resources'<sup>7</sup>, which provides a forum for discussion of web-based research tools.

Publishers have also capitalized on the power of social networking to reach users; the Nature Publishing Group's 'Nature Networks'<sup>8</sup> are intended to draw international scientists together for discussion of scientific issues and events. In doing so, Nature hopes to "raise the visibility of individual scientists and encourage early collaboration and information sharing"<sup>9</sup>, though doubts have been expressed about whether researchers (by

nature protective of their findings) will want to engage in this way. Nature's global network is complemented by local hubs (based, so far, in Boston and London) which provide more specific event listings and, potentially, enable face-to-face networking to develop from its virtual counterpart, bringing the concept full circle. Other publishers, such as BioMedCentral<sup>10</sup>, have enabled articles on their site to be posted to Facebook to stimulate discussion amongst users.

Meanwhile, individuals within the information community have gathered at professional network LinkedIn. Its profiles are effectively online *curricula vitae*, helping users to head-hunt staff or search for jobs, but beyond that, they enable collation and sharing of useful contacts, and give users the opportunity to build relationships with current and prospective clients, service providers, influencers or other key industry personnel.

### What are the potential pitfalls of social networking?

In the relatively short period since social networking burst into popular usage, there has been considerable exploration of its possibilities by all parties within the information community. Financial investment does not need to be heavy – many services are freely available online – but configuration and maintenance can be time consuming, and as with many such initiatives, return on investment is difficult to calculate. Proponents also need to consider the willingness or ability of their target market to engage with such technologies; a recent proposal to replace listservs and other current

discussion technologies with Facebook groups<sup>11</sup> met with immediate resistance from users prohibited from accessing social networking sites by their employer's firewall. Other implications to be considered are the need to monitor social networking spaces for the inevitable spam deluge and for potentially libellous comments. (Some universities have had to take action against students attacking staff through messages on social networks.) Deployed with caution, however, social networking tools provide a useful channel for interacting with users and building a valuable community around your organization or service.

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