by Jill Barson Gilbert

Web 2.0 A New Way to Network

Web 2.0, a perceived second generation

of the World Wide Web, facilitates person-to-person connectivity, collaboration, and sharing. Whereas Web 1.0 allowed users only to retrieve information, the new Web is an interactive two-way superhighway. Social networking, a Web 2.0 phenomenon, reaches beyond the popular networking sites and has entered the business arena. Web 2.0 has become a business in itself, as the new economy thrives on inter-human connections.

WEB 2.0 IN SIMPLE TERMS

The term Web 1.0 refers to a set of specifications for the primary technologies that form the basis for the World Wide Web: URL (Uniform Resource Locator), HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol), and HTML (HyperText Markup Language). Web 2.0 suggests a new version of the World Wide Web with a set of improvements. It is more how people use the Internet than a specific set of standards. While Web 2.0 means different things to different people, most agree that Web 2.0 includes the use of the Internet as a computing platform; active interaction versus read-only sites; transformation of isolated data into a body of knowledge; and interaction among Web communities.

A traditional Web site allows only the Web site's owner to modify the content, and site visitors can only view and download the content. Web 2.0 sites allow visitors to do more than retrieve information. Using software that runs entirely on a Web browser, visitors can "own" and control data on another person's Web site. For instance, site visitors can add information to a wiki, post a comment on a blog, or add a profile to a social networking site (see "Wikis and Blogs Infiltrate the Business World," *EM* April 2007, p. 32).

In conventional networks, most of the connections between people are hidden. Web 2.0 social networks provide visibility, enabling people to reach contacts that in the past were difficult to find. The process works like this…

- Select the social network you want to join, and enter your profile.
- Search for people that you want to join your network and send each an invitation.
- Once individuals accept your invitation, you can see their contacts, and they can see yours.

When you complete the process, you can see your contacts' contacts and your contacts' contacts' contacts. You can expand your network by inviting your contacts' contacts directly, or by requesting an introduction.

WEB 2.0 IN BUSINESS

We all use contact databases, whether a box of business cards collected at face-to-face meetings or an electronic database like Act or Outlook. Sharing the contacts hidden within these databases requires a making phone call or sending an e-mail to another person. Social networking sites provide visibility through databases built on Web platforms. Network members can use their network to find expert advice, seek jobs, seek business opportunities, or simply stay in touch with others.

SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION

I have networked the conventional way for my entire career. I broke into the information technology field as an environmental expert through contacts I made as an A&WMA member. My first assignments after forming my own company, and most since then, resulted from traditional networking.

As an experiment, I opened a free account on a leading business networking site. In a matter of minutes, I found more than 50 former coworkers, 10 A&WMA members, 50 other business colleagues, and a few long-lost college friends. I invited 66 people to join my network, and within less than one business day 37 had accepted my invitation. With the multiplication effect—their contacts became my second-degree contacts and my contacts' contacts became my third-degree contacts—I quickly established a network of nearly 200,000 people. My experiment produced a great return for few hours' effort… now I need to "work the network" to see where it takes me.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Business and government alike are starting to take advantage of Web 2.0. Its collaboration, information sharing, and problem-solving benefits make social networking attractive. Its organic, grass-roots approach makes it exciting and appealing, especially to younger professionals.

Organizations are cautious about social networks and other Web 2.0 features because of technical issues like bandwidth; privacy concerns; the amount of time spent on social networking sites; and fakesters (i.e., those who establish fake, as opposed to authentic, profiles) and predators that lurk in the shadows.

To continue to attract new members, social networks must provide fresh and appealing content. Members must establish and maintain a profile. This takes time and energy for each network joined.

THE FUTURE

Organic growth and participation will determine the value of social networking in business. Social networks need to reach a critical mass, and members need to actively participate to provide value. If you believe that conventional networks are effective and are willing to try Web 2.0 social networks, you can benefit. You can gain visibility, whether your goal is to collaborate with others to solve problems, find a job or new business opportunity, or just stay in touch. Remember, it is an interactive process, and you must give as well as receive. **em**

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