



The key to any good marketing strategy is to reach the decision makers. While this may sound easy, anyone who has spent time designing an e-mail blast, newsletter, direct mail postcard, or crafted a message can tell you it is sometimes difficult to reach the perfect candidate each and every time.

Enter the electronic networking site. A spinoff of the early internet "chat" rooms, sites such as FaceBook and MySpace revolutionized the way people interacted. Instead of simply writing e-mails to one another, now people could blog their thoughts, share photos and comments all in the blink of an eye.

But the true appeal of these sites is the extended network of friends and acquaintances one could connect with instantly. A friend of a friend was once simply an expression, but on these sites the shared acquaintance has become a tangible person, and this is a potential gold mine for marketing possibilities.

LINKEDIN: THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE RIGHT ON YOUR DESKTOP

A new site which has been gaining popularity is LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com). This site is more professional than the average social networking site, with people's profiles reading more like a cv or resume as opposed to their likes and dislikes, and has been attracting a strong business professional audience. As per the site, 30 million users worldwide have functioning profiles. What's more, this site attracts not only the executive assistants and middle management but everyone, from receptionists to HR managers to executives, and they can all connect with each other. So how do you get in on the network and use it to your advantage?

CREATE A PROFESSIONAL PROFILE

First, you have to register at the site and create a profile. To create your profile, simply follow the list of needed information LinkedIn provides. Before inserting your professional and personal information, think about what you would like to accomplish using LinkedIn. Are you looking for new clients? Launching a new product? The information you provide in your profile should be

closely in line with your goals. For example, if you are offering your services as an expert keynote speaker for a particular industry, provide your experience and all needed details on what makes you an expert speaker. Be sure to include specific contact information and details on your work and talents, and always make sure your writing is brisk, professional and to the point.

Second, begin inviting associates to join your network. LinkedIn can search for possible connections for you based on your current and past work experience, and can even sync with your e-mail server to find anyone on LinkedIn you have communicated with in the past. Once found, you can choose to invite them to join your network. Again, think carefully before inviting associates to join your network. Invite people you know personally and professionally, and only those you trust. The adage "You can judge a man by his friends" is an apt one at LinkedIn. These connections will lend to your own reputation so be sure to choose wisely.

Third, seek out Recommendations, which are essentially endorsements from other LinkedIn users. This is a feature unique to LinkedIn, and can be a valuable tool. Ask colleagues to provide short, well-written recommendations on your prior work, duties, or products you have worked on. Once these items are in place, you are ready to begin networking.

UTILIZING YOUR 1ST, 2ND AND 3RD DEGREE NETWORK

The associates you invite personally will make up your 1st Degree Network. Once these associates accept your invitation to join your network, you will be able to browse through their 1st Degree Network. These users make up your 2nd Degree Network. Beyond these specific contacts is your 3rd Degree Network.

As your network grows, you can begin communicating with your associates by sending e-mail messages, or "InMails." In addition, you can ask a contact in your 1st Degree Network to send an introduction to one of their own contacts on your behalf. This is a reliable way to add contacts and build your network, and your



focus should be specifically on inviting key executives and decision makers to join your network.

While LinkedIn provides a free personal membership, this option limits communication to your network. If you wish to e-mail other users, opting for the Business, Business Plus or Pro memberships will allow you to send communications, called "InMails," to people within all network levels. These membership types require monthly or yearly fees, but they are recommended in order to get the most use from LinkedIn.

REACHING THE DECISION MAKERS

Now that you have a carefully crafted, growing network in place, you can begin relaying your marketing message. Send InMails to key executives, answer questions in the Answers section and earn expert status, and update your profile as your marketing plans unfold. In addition to your own growing network, you can join any number of Groups at LinkedIn, such as your university alumni group, marketing and public relations groups, or business development groups. Groups with a smaller number of members may be more responsive and helpful than groups with hundreds or thousands of members, so be sure to join a handful of groups that align with your goals. Once your inclusion in these groups is approved, you can begin conversing with the groups' members by way of message boards—ask questions, offer your services and knowledge, anything that gets a response from the groups' members.

While maintaining your profile and communications on LinkedIn will take up a number of hours each week, the result will be a rich network of professionals and potential clients you can source for many years to come.

Sarah Berman serves as President of The Berman Group, a full-service marketing, public relations and special events organization in New York City. The firm specializes in serving business-to-business clients in the real estate, construction and professional services industries. The firm's website can be found at bermangrp.com.