

# Time to Twitter?

How to determine if a social networking site is right for your business

In today's highly technological world, if your business doesn't keep up with the times, you'll be quickly left in the dust. And, in this day and age, a well-designed Web site is not enough. The rise of social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or even YouTube, has forced businesses to adjust their approaches to branding and marketing.

Despite other companies' successes and a seemingly nationwide push to embrace social networking, many businesses are not jumping on the bandwagon, simply because they feel that it cannot and will not benefit their organizations. But, if done right, social networking sites can be great ways to drive your business into the future. They can help you build your brand, gain recognition around the world, reach audiences never before possible and network with clients, colleagues and customers. At the same time, however, there are risks you need to be aware of.

"With the proliferation of social networking sites comes risks and drawbacks, not the least of which are security and confidentiality breaches and employee nonproductivity," says Peter B. Maretz, a shareholder with Shea Stokes Roberts & Wagner. "But, one cannot ignore the business potential of such an efficient and comprehensive medium. Social networking is an inexpensive way of getting and keeping your name and business profile in front of your existing and potential clients. One can hardly argue with that."

*Smart Business* spoke with Maretz about social networking and the risks and rewards that come with it.

## What are the benefits of a company and/or its employees joining a social networking site?

We are only just learning the business value of social networking sites. In addition to 'advertising' yourself to clients, you are able to present a profile of your company to potential new employees, in an even more fluid and accessible way than a Web site. Now, you find information — good and bad — about job candidates that you never could before. Learning that a candidate is an avid photographer or triathlete might give you a better sense of how that person will fit into the culture of your firm. On the other hand, another candidate's social networking site might



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indicate a maturity level you'll be grateful you knew about before you invested in that person.

For the time being, a business presence on a social networking site is an indication of a more progressive company. It gives you an online brand, and it helps you attract more forward-thinking individuals. In fact, recent studies have shown that upward of 20 percent of young recruits would choose not to take a job with a firm or even leave a current employer if they were not allowed to access social networking sites at work.

Other reports indicate that limited access to social networking sites by employees while on the job, even if it is for strictly personal pursuits, acts as a mental refresher, resulting in more productivity overall.

Finally, when it's necessary to share large electronic files, such as videos, with people at other offices, posting the video on YouTube is more efficient than trying to e-mail the large files.

## What are the drawbacks?

Of course, the concept of limited access to the Internet is fine in theory, but that's

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like asking someone to put away that open bag of potato chips. No one eats just one. The technical problems of the Internet also remain, and increased access to social networking sites raises the potential for viruses, spyware and hackers.

For reasons well beyond the scope of this article, people tend to have a heightened sense of empowerment on the Internet. With that comes the potential for abuse, including harassment. Likewise, employees with material on their personal sites that is considered inappropriate for the workplace may appear to be bringing material into the workplace by networking with co-workers, especially if it's done on company time and using company equipment.

There are pitfalls in recruiting, as well. Say a candidate's Facebook page indicates he or she is a member of a legally protected class of persons you wouldn't have otherwise been aware of. Even if you reject that candidate for legitimate reasons, you may still face a wrongful failure to hire claim if it's learned you accessed that candidate's page.

## How can a company protect itself once it joins a social networking site?

Make sure you have a strong electronic systems policy that clearly defines what your employees are allowed to do, and affirmatively address it with your people. Don't be content to merely bury it in your handbook. Remind employees that you will be monitoring their Internet activities, and that while the occasional dalliance onto Twitter is OK, it must be limited.

Make sure your employees know the repercussions for inappropriate conduct, such as harassment and confidentiality breaches on social networking sites. And caution employees about mixing business and personal spaces. There are sites, such as [www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com), where you can create password-controlled spaces for exchange of information, videos, blogs and discussion groups among specific employee or client groups. <<