



by donna schlessinger

**So**, you've set up your account on Facebook, acquired a bunch of "friends", shared photos old and new and maybe even reconnected with some old classmates. You've become so dependent on your Blackberry that, should the battery die or you misplace the phone, you simply cannot function.

Or perhaps you're not quite there yet and you've proclaimed your "anti"-tech status; rarely checking email or (gasp!) don't even have an email account. Do words like Twitter and Blog make your eyes glaze over and roll back in your head? While we can appreciate one's fear of this unknown online world, or interest to stay connected through more conventional modes, we are here to alert you: you are simply in the dark. At minimum, exploring these new web technologies will not only benefit you, it will keep you connected to the next generation and what is, after all, our most important asset, our children.

Why on earth would you need or want to take part in this online conversation? What are the benefits and drawbacks and really – what's the difference from one application to the next? Should you Facebook? Like to Tweet? Do you Digg? Are you Delicious? There are so many social networking websites and platforms that a "home" can be found no matter where your interests lie.

To simplify the "Web 2.0" concept, think of the internet as a group of online communities that can be sorted by subject matter. Whatever your interests, you can easily locate a group of like-minded people who

come together to share information. Just like the communities in which we live, your neighbors can and should be used as a great resource because essentially, we are all connected. The contributions made by one benefit us all. Once you have a firm grasp on this concept, you can begin to really benefit from online communication.

One of these online communities is the **blogosphere**, a place where people go to do their "blogging" or where someone wants you to go when they ask you to "visit their blog." Blog is a term used to describe a kind of online journal, or web log. Think of a blog as a diary that can contain information on any subject: images, links to other websites, jokes, rumors, or just random and even sometimes meaningless ramblings – basically anything that the author finds of interest.

Think of blogging as a self-publishing tool. There's no limit on how much content you can publish and you are the Editor. What a concept! A great thing about a blog is that it allows the reader to comment on these entries. Once a comment is reviewed and approved by the author, it becomes public and voila! Your online conversation has begun.

Blogs will come up in search engines based on keywords. If you do a Google (Google.com) search on red wine and someone has blogged about it, you can click on the link and read all of the postings out there. Warning! Sometimes a search can yield some junk and you'll have to sift through to find good content. There's a double-edged sword of sorts in that anyone can contribute

from a wine novice to an expert sommelier.

Blogs are used to obtain an audience both personally and professionally. The goal is to gain readership because, let's face it, you may be a creative-writing genius but if no one is tuning in, what's the point? This premise carries over to companies both large and small; it can be a great forum to communicate with your customers, existing and potential. You can – on a very organic level – hear from your users in a public forum. This is not a one-to-one exchange! This is a one-to-many and back again. Comments can be moderated and posted (or not), at the discretion of the blog author(s). A good and effective blog will engage its readership and have repeat visitors who will return as often as content is fresh and interesting. Blogs are created and maintained by celebrities, politicians, large corporations and people like you and me.

How do I start a blog? Blogs are free to set up and to maintain. Among the many websites that do not charge to set up a blog are Wordpress.com, Blogger.com or Vox.com. These websites make it extremely easy to get started. Limitations do exist, such as customization options.

If considering starting a blog to increase business, attach the blog to your existing website. There are many reasons to do this; the most compelling is to increase traffic to your website and, ultimately your business. This process is a bit more complex and may involve a small expense based on customization.

**Facebook** (facebook.com) is one of many sites in the social networking community. According to a recent study by Nielson Online, "the social network and blogging audience is becoming more diverse in terms of age: the biggest increase in visitors during 2008 to "Member Community" web sites globally came from the 35-49 year old age group (+11.3 million)".

On Facebook, users open an account at facebook.com free of charge, provide basic information (remember – only as much as you want to reveal) and you're in. Facebook will require some information that is not optional such as your email address. You are now participating in one of the most popular online dialogues. With a few keystrokes, you enable the Facebook software to read your address book and reach out to your "friends". Yes, your personal information and "friend"ships are now part of the web. This is a great platform to connect and reconnect with the people and places in our lives.

In addition to Facebook, which is the #1 social networking site according to compete.com, there are a slew of others. Rounding out the top 5 are MySpace, Twitter, Flixter and LinkedIn.

While Facebook provides a huge platform for sharing and updates (users can optionally

fill out a blank form to tell friends their latest musings), **MySpace** (myspace.com) serves up content differently. While members of the Facebook community ostensibly know their friends, that is not necessarily the case in the MySpace world. There is an underlying modus operandi that drives the average MySpace user, which is to amass as many friends as possible, even ones you don't know. MySpace is also a platform for many musical acts to showcase and promote their acts, a feature available on Facebook as well.

An interesting aside...according to an informal survey conducted by Mashable's Pete Cashmore, an overwhelming 50% felt that MySpace was the go-to social networking site for what they euphemistically called "dating" (read "hooking up").

Next is **Twitter** (twitter.com), which is a micro-blogging site. The Twitter model is simple: acquire followers and in 140 characters or less, answer the question, "What are you doing?" as often as you like. Once you set up your Twitter account, which is so simple, you can easily search for friends that are also using the service – again by allowing access to your email account. You select your online user name you've self-created and then provide basic information so others can know a bit about you (i.e., Mary Jones: I love to garden

and I live for Kid Rock). These friends become your "followers" and as such, will be privy to your every move, recommendation and utterance. The "keywords" that you provide about your interests or business/hobbies will work as the map so that people can find you. Twitter has a search feature and if identified as a Kid Rock fan, your name will appear when those same words are searched. In turn, you may get some followers of your own.

Many people ask, what's the purpose of Twitter? This is a valid question. To the uninitiated the point can be difficult to gauge. However, if you have any sort of agenda (i.e., a business or charity that you want to promote) Twitter can be a really powerful tool, as was evidenced in the recent controversy in Iran during their election. Twitter was the sole mode of communication with the outside world and users utilized the service to post real-time images from the frontlines of the protests.

The key is to acquire many followers. This environment is a bit different than Facebook or MySpace. Here, you begin by following those who interest you by typing in key words and seeing the results. You can then choose to follow them. As people see your profile (while following your choices) they may begin, in turn to follow you. You can also set certain tags onto your profile that will pull up your profile

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when others do their search.

This is viral marketing in its most basic form. If you “Tweet” well (and again, good and frequent content is key) then people will “re-Tweet” your posts, creating a snowball effect and hopefully, create the interest in your business or event and drive the online conversation in your direction.

**Flixter** (flixter.com) is an online community where people gather to share their love of movies. Visitors make recommendations and share their reviews. It’s that simple. Less than 3 years old, this site, by its own estimation, has had 15 million unique visitors and almost 2 billion movie ratings posted.

People rate and review films in this community. You can be linked to your friends by common interests regarding actors, genre and so forth. You may never really “know” your friends having never met, but can tap into this resource to get the info wanted. Similarly, you are fully encouraged to post and share your own ratings. Other features of the site include quizzes, the ability to watch television shows and films, participate in polls, take personality tests and more.

**LinkedIn** (linkedin.com) is an interconnected network of experienced professionals from around the world, representing 170 industries and 200 countries. You can find, be introduced to, and collaborate with qualified professionals to potentially accomplish your goals.

LinkedIn is a site with a business model geared to professional networking. The concept is to use professional and personal business contacts for collaboration and to, in turn, make recommendations and introductions. When joining, the user creates a profile that highlights your professional experience and accomplishments. You can then invite others to join LinkedIn and connect to you. Your network consists of your connections, your connections’ connections, and the people they know, linking you to a growing number of qualified professionals and experts. *PLEASE NOTE: do not accept someone’s invitation to their LinkedIn page from an email address you don’t want potentially shared on the web. However, if you are interested in networking, this site can be very valuable.*

Another popular site is **YouTube**, (youtube.com) a community where people share videos, subscribe to other’s channels and provide ratings. YouTube has become so mainstream and user-friendly, that we all take part in this creative process. People post original work as well as old television commercials and films. It’s become a superb source for finding and researching old clips and has paved the way for other online video

sharing platforms including Hulu (hulu.com).

As with all these online sites, signup on YouTube is free and an account is not needed to view posted videos. An account is necessary, however, if you want to post your own videos. Subject matter is as varied from old commercials and jingles to serious news clips.

Kids are posting self-made videos and uploading them to YouTube, Facebook and the like. Again the subject matter varies widely here from simple personal videos posted to a friend’s wall to scripted vignettes filmed with others. One local teen created a slideshow of his favorite video game weapons, set it to music and at last count is approaching 50,000 views. The numbers are staggering. Be aware of what your children are creating. Strangers can and will tune in and possibly try to make a personal connection based on what they see. As with any toy, oversight with your children and the internet is paramount.

Let’s not forget **Digg** (digg.com) and **Delicious** (delicious.com). These are two sites that are somewhat similar in nature in that they both provide users a platform to share any information found on the web with other users. With Digg, people make recommendations by essentially saying, “I digg this so check it out”. Here’s a site that is truly acting in service to the mission of the Internet – to spread and share information. Delicious is a social bookmarking service that allows users to tag, save, manage and share web pages from one centralized source. Delicious places emphasis on the power of the community and its mission is to simplify how we all share information on the Internet.

What truly distinguishes sites like Digg from Delicious and the other social networking sites is new and original content. Digg & Delicious are not the venue to post original content such as videos, photos and blogs. Their purpose is to provide your opinion and recommend places you’ve visited online with fresh content. These sites are the old-school equivalent of mailing an article to a friend.

There are new social networking sites joining the party all the time. They’re easy to use, a little addictive and fun. They have also proven to be an effective business tool. But like all guilty pleasures, they have their faults. They can be time-suckers and expose you and the information you provide to the world at-large.

So proceed, but do so with caution. |

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## No primer on web technology would be complete without a discussion on privacy...

In truth, online privacy is becoming somewhat of an urban myth. Once you begin posting online, the privacy you once knew is gone. Friends can now “tag” (publicly identify) you in photos, some of which may not be entirely flattering and once your footprint is left in the sand, there it will remain. Select social networking platforms do allow you to “untag” yourself in a photo but be forewarned: it doesn’t matter! Anyone who sees these images can do a virtual “grab” of the offending material and repost it anywhere! It can resurface on another page, another site, anywhere. Whether you are tagged or not, it’s “out there” and the footprint is concrete (not sand).

What can you do to control your online image? Use an email address you are comfortable with to separate personal from business or hobbies. Do not post personal email address to a blog but rather, create a new one exclusively for this purpose. And provide an overload of self-created content. This essentially “buries” older images, articles and posts by virtue of pushing them farther down the chronological chain. If someone does do a search on you, the first entries viewed will be material you have contributed to.

When creating new accounts (which is always an option) craft the information entered carefully. Think ahead to what you want your audience to take away from your profile. It’s that simple. And if you make a mistake? Take your account down and start from scratch.

A word of caution when creating any social networking account: You will be asked if you’d like to find people you know using the service. Saying “yes” to this request is usually an indication that the software will phish through your address book to make connections. It may even send automated messages to your friends who are not using the service to “invite” them to open up their own account. Our recommendation: Just say no!

Here’s another morsel of food for thought: Be aware of the information you supply in the endless “quizzes” and personality tests offered online. This can be viewed as a form of personal information gathering and profiling. We like to think of this not as cynical but savvy. As long as you are aware, you’re prepared.