

Online Social Networking Tools That Boost Business

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03/25/2009

Most people are familiar with the term “Web 2.0,” which refers to a second generation of Web development and design that focuses on fostering social networking via the Web. Innovative companies are beginning to embrace Web 2.0 as a way to enhance communication, information sharing, and collaboration, thereby allowing them to work smarter rather than harder.

The business use of Web 2.0 represents a new trend called “Business 2.0.” Aside from being the name of a defunct magazine, Business 2.0 is about using the new Web-based social networking applications (many of which were originally created for personal use) in a way that fosters teamwork, customer outreach, and internal and external collaboration in a low-cost seamless way.

Unfortunately, many businesses feel that Web 2.0 and social networking are for the younger generation and are a waste of time when used by employees. However, once you understand the power of these applications and how to use them in your company, you’ll quickly find that they can be invaluable tools to boost your bottom line.

Following is an overview of the best Business 2.0 tools.

Personal Tools with Business Applicability

Facebook

Personal use: Facebook enables you to connect and share with the people in your life. Users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school, and region to connect and interact with others. People can add friends, send them messages, and update their personal profiles to notify friends about themselves.

Business 2.0 use: Large organizations can connect all of their employees, or members, with Facebook. Some are finding an added advantage of using an internal, secure version of Facebook. This has helped organizations to dramatically increase their internal networking and collaboration.

Ask yourself: Could we use Facebook, or our own internal version, to get people to collaborate at a higher level?

Twitter

Personal use: Twitter is a micro-blogging service that allows friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of short, quick answers using no more than 140 characters per message. Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or co-workers. Users can receive updates via the Twitter

Web site or other social networking sights such as Facebook. Young people use Twitter for answering the question: What are you doing?

Business 2.0 use: Business users could change that question to: What problem are you trying to solve? Several companies have used this as a fast way to solve problems. Hotels, airlines, and airports are using Twitter to pitch services, travel updates, and respond to travelers' needs.

Ask yourself: Could we use Twitter to solve problems faster with our organization or our customers?

Wikipedia

Personal use: Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia that anyone can use to find information on virtually any topic. Anyone can edit the content as well.

Business 2.0 use: A large manufacturing company with engineers in locations around the world increased problem solving and collaboration by creating an internal, secure version of Wikipedia for sharing information on parts and service offerings as well as repair and maintenance instructions. Retailers and suppliers could create a version of Wikipedia to foster education and training as well as enhanced information sharing.

Ask yourself: Could we create an internal version of Wikipedia to foster better information and knowledge sharing?

YouTube

Personal use: YouTube is a video sharing Web site where users can upload, view, and share video clips. YouTube displays a wide variety of user-generated video content as well as movie clips, product demonstrations, and commercials. Unregistered users can watch the videos, while registered users can upload an unlimited number of videos.

Business 2.0 use: Businesses are posting humorous commercial videos to generate interest in their products with great success. The more entertaining it is, the more people watch it. Business partners could create a YouTube like channel for the purpose of educating and training.

Ask Yourself: Could we enhance our marketing efforts as well as general communication by using YouTube?

Digg

Personal use: Digg is a social news Web site made for people to discover and share content from anywhere on the Internet, by submitting and accessing links and stories. Voting stories thumbs up or a thumb down is the site's cornerstone function, respectively called digging and burying.

Business 2.0 use: Many organizations have found this to be a good way to track the most interesting advances in technology or the most useful business news. Large organizations can create their own internal version for sharing what employees consider to be the most useful information.

Ask yourself: Could we use Digg, or our own internal version, to get people to share their most interesting and valuable Web-based information with each other?

Delicious

Personal use: Delicious is a social bookmarking Web service for storing, sharing,

and discovering Web bookmarks. It uses a non-hierarchical classification system in which users can tag each of their bookmarks with freely chosen index terms.

Business 2.0 use: Business users can share their most useful Web sites with co-workers or business partners. If a customer purchases a product, sellers could share relevant bookmarks that keep the customer coming back for more information and hopefully more products.

Ask yourself: Could we use Delicious to share important new Web sites faster within our organization or with our customers?

Visual Communications

Personal use: Visual Communications, unlike traditional video conferencing, uses your desktop, laptop, and soon your smart phone to hold a quick, anytime, anywhere videoconference with one or more other people. Travelers who must be away from home are using their laptops in hotel rooms with broadband access and free software such as Skype and AIM to communicate with family and friends to enhance their personal connection.

Business 2.0 use: Businesses are discovering the power of Visual Communications to enhance the connection with their sales force, business partners, and customers.

Ask yourself: Could we use Visual Communications to enhance communications internally and externally?

Purely Business 2.0 Tools

Wiki

A Wiki is a collaborative Web page or collection of Web pages designed to enable anyone to create a quick Web page that allows visitors to search the Wiki's content and edit the content in real time, as well as view updates since their last visit. Wikis are often used to create collaborative Web sites and to power community Web sites. On a moderated Wiki, Wiki owners review comments before additions to the main body of the topic. Additional features include calendar sharing, live AV conferencing, RSS feeds, and more.

Ask yourself: Could we use Wikis to enhance internal and external collaboration?

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a business-oriented professional networking Web site for exchanging information, ideas, and opportunities. There are more than 35 million registered users spanning 170 industries actively networking with each other. For example, large insurance companies use LinkedIn to foster networking with their independent sales representatives. HR professionals from all over the world could use LinkedIn to share best practices.

Ask yourself: Could we use LinkedIn to expand our organizational network for enhanced knowledge sharing?

Cloud Computing & Software as a Service

In Cloud Computing, some or all of the storage, software, IT processes, and data

center facilities you use can exist on your provider's server, which is maintained and cared for by your provider, giving you 24/7 access from any device anywhere.

The cost of upgrading hardware and software, maintenance, and associated IT labor costs can be dramatically reduced or eliminated. Currently, the ideal organization would be any size company that's facing big investments in computing and communications infrastructure.

For example, Amazon.com can give you an entire e-commerce back end. Software as a Service (SaaS) such as Salesforce.com has a CRM package, SciQuest has a spend management package, and Google, Microsoft and others have a suite of offerings.

Ask yourself: Could we use Cloud Computing & Software as a service to streamline our IT needs?

Gain a New Competitive Advantage

By reframing the use of social networking technology, companies can increase communication, collaboration, problem solving, and competitive advantage with little cost. Remember, many of these tools are free or nearly free, making them accessible to even the smallest business. Therefore, the sooner you embrace Business 2.0 and put it to work for you, the faster you can penetrate new markets and win the lion's share of business.