

SHOULD MySpace BE PART OF YOUR Internet Strategy?

Make This Online Community Part of Your E-Strategy

By Don Lafferty



Business owners and entrepreneurs are finally starting to grasp the "viral marketing" power of this social networking web site.

Avalon Sewing Company is expanding. Owner Lhay Thriffiley is building upon what used to be her home-based business, adding staff and moving into renovated space in a revitalized area of downtown Hattiesburg, Mississippi. While Thriffiley has a web site for Avalon, MySpace is her only Internet presence today. Nevertheless, the network she's established through her MySpace has been effective in helping her connect with suppliers, potential customers, and employees – and she's managed to do all this for free.

Business owners and entrepreneurs are finally starting to grasp the "viral marketing" power of this social networking web site. With over 100 million registered users on board and thirty-five million unique visitors daily, MySpace is a direct link to demographics representing billions of revenue dollars in numerous markets.

In a business environment where having a web site and using email have become basic building blocks in a company's daily sales and marketing effort, having a MySpace page is quickly gaining momentum as a standard component of many marketing strategies. For startups and home-based businesses, MySpace has increasingly become the jumping off point into Internet marketing.

"I had no idea there were so many women out there just like me," Thriffiley said, "using the things they'd learned from their grandmothers to earn a living. When I started connecting with people through MySpace, it helped me to believe in myself and my vision."

MySpace is the largest, most widely recognized name in the growing field of online social networking web sites. While MySpace first caught on with younger Internet surfers,

some 87% of users today are 18 or older and more than 50% are over the age of 35, according to the research firm, comScore Media Metrix. These demographics represent the Gen X, Gen Y, and Young Boomers, who together account for half of all spending in the United States. Registering up to 230,000 new users on an average day, MySpace's popularity doesn't appear to be losing momentum.

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EFFECTIVE MARKETING AT NO COST

Joining MySpace is free and easy to do. (See sidebar, "Setting up Your MySpace" on page 82.) Visit www.myspace.com, and follow the simple signup instructions. Once signed up, a user has the option to post photos, interesting links, slide shows and videos, as well as a description of who they are and why they've joined the community. Additional sections in a MySpace profile allow the user to provide as much detailed information as necessary to convey the "digital personality" he is trying to achieve.

Once a profile is established, the user builds a community of "Friends" who become members of each other's immediate network. This is the aspect of MySpace that has grabbed the attention of savvy marketers everywhere. The "Browse" function of a MySpace page enables the user to define a search for "Friends" by gender, age, income, education, geography, and a number of other filters. Once a search is complete, the user simply invites the MySpace

community members who fit his target networking profile. When that community member accepts your invitation, he becomes your friend and you become his, each growing your immediate network by one Friend.

A MySpace user will typically visit the page of the community member who is befriending him to see if he really has an interest in adding that member to his network. At this critical moment, your MySpace page has about ten seconds to make a good impression. If the newcomer likes what he sees, he'll accept your invitation.

You and your new Friend are now able to "Comment" and "Bulletin" each other features only available within a network of friends. The more friends you have, the more MySpace users you can reach out and touch with one click of your computer's mouse.

REINFORCING A LOCAL PRESENCE

Kenny's Spirited Eatery in Southampton, Pennsylvania, has been a respected member of the Bucks County business community since 1955. After a dramatic renovation and expansion, management targeted a younger demographic to fill the additional capacity by reshaping their live entertainment and engaging their suppliers to host co-op promotional events.

Matt Orlow employed MySpace in his marketing strategy for Kenny's. "It's the only marketing channel we've found that directly reaches the twenty-something crowd," said Orlow. Soliciting everyone's input, from owners Joe & Vince Shields to the busboys, Orlow was able to amass over three thousand friends in just a few months for Kenny's. The restaurant's owners are now able to reach out and

Continued on page 30

MySpace Internet Strategy

Continued from page 28

touch their core clientele through their MySpace page, announcing menu changes, entertainment schedules, and special events.

To get extra mileage out of their MySpace effort, each Thursday night Kenny's waives the cover charge for patrons who bring along a printout of Kenny's MySpace profile. Patrons report that they visit Kenny's MySpace frequently to see if they show up in the newest pictures posted.

"An important part of any marketing effort is the ability to measure success," said Orlow. "We can see a buzz has been started, not only on the Web, but in the restaurant, as well."

FEATURES AND TOOLS

Self-marketers can make good use of the comprehensive tools that MySpace provides for staying in touch with members of the community. It is these tools that create opportunities for "buzz marketing" and "viral marketing."

Send Message: MySpace has an internal email system through which community members can send each other private email messages. A user can embed html, pictures or videos including links to web sites outside the MySpace environment. When a user signs in, he will be alerted to the new message and has the option to respond.

Comment: With this feature, you can leave



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a public message on a Friend's MySpace page. This is one of the viral aspects of MySpace, as your Comment is visible to everyone who visits your Friend's page. If you include a hyperlinked picture, anyone can click on the Comment and be directed either to your MySpace page or any web site of your choosing. The Comment fea-

ture provides a personal touch between you and the Friend you're Commenting.

Bulletin: If you post a Bulletin, you're posting something on the Bulletin Board of every one of your Friends simultaneously. When a user signs into his MySpace home page, the last four Bulletins are visible. You can see who

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sent the Bulletin and the subject matter. When you click on the subject of the Bulletin you see the full body, which has the same appearance and features as an email. A user is able to respond directly back to you with a private email message.

Blog: The Blog function on MySpace is a more focused, consensual form of Bulletin-like communication with your Friends. When a Friend subscribes to your Blog, he will be alerted every time the content of your Blog changes and be offered the option to view the new material. This is less intrusive than the Bulletin feature and provides you with a forum for your most interested and engaged Friends.

Groups: MySpace Groups allow a member to join a wide variety of interest-based sub-communities, similar to Yahoo Groups, Google and MSN. This enables the user to find groups of community members with a common interest. When novelist Jonathan Maberry's book, "Ghost Road Blues", was recently nominated for two Bram Stoker awards, he was able to spread the news to more than one hundred thousand kindred spirits through his MySpace group affiliations. When a common bond like this dovetails with your networking goals, the group environment provides another vehicle for alerting your MySpace network to a product, service or

news item they might find beneficial.

Events: You can schedule an Event which will trigger an Event invitation to all of the Friends in your network. This is particularly useful for communicating things like open houses, book signings, or other noteworthy happenings to your Friends. An RSVP function allows members to respond.

Chat: A rarely used feature is "chat," since other chat programs — like AIM, Yahoo Messenger, Skype, and Windows Messenger — are far more widely used.

MANAGING YOUR MYSPACE STRATEGY

Once you are confident your MySpace conveys a message and image consistent with your business networking objectives, it's time to work it. The most important component of this will be to build your network of Friends by driving traffic to your MySpace page. You can do this in a few specific ways.

- You can search for Friends, targeting specific characteristics through the Browse and Search features, inviting those who meet your criteria as you find them.
- You can include your MySpace URL in the signature of your email, and include it in your printed mailings and other promotional materials.
- You can cross link your MySpace URL

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— Matt Orlow, Kenny's Spirited Eatery

with your other Internet marketing tools like web sites, Yahoo Groups and other web-based forums.

Once your network of friends begins to grow, you can increase the number of your "Top Friends" from four to as many as twenty-four. This is the group of Friends that will be visible to anyone who visits your home page. Being in someone's Tops carries prestige. Users frequently jockey Friends through their Tops to stroke them and to use them as bait. For instance, if you put someone in your Tops who represents your core target demographic, you can browse through their Friends, inviting anyone you think meets those same networking criteria. When new users receive your invitation, they will visit your MySpace page, see their Friend in your Tops, and likely accept your invitation.

Choose sixteen Top Friends and rotate them about every week or two. This will give new

Continued on page 82

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- Lhay Thriffley, Avalon Sewing Company

invitees time to find their Friend in your Tops and accept your invitation. This strategy provides a steady stream of new Friends from which to choose, as well as a thread of consistency, since you're harvesting Friends from networks based on the criteria you set forth at

the beginning of your strategy. Equally important, this method adheres to MySpace's Terms of Service, which prohibit the use of automated friend-finding software.

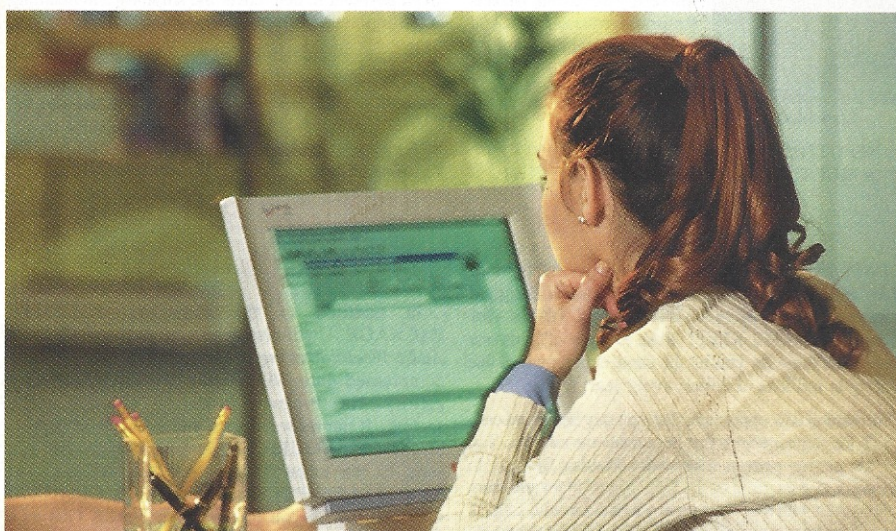
If your business has a local demographic, as in the case of Kenny's, concentrate your efforts on developing a group of friends within a reasonable geographic radius by setting that parameter in the Browse function.

A warning: MySpace's Terms of Service document discourages its outright use "in connection with any commercial endeavors." You'll find it easy to promote yourself and your business within acceptable guidelines, however, as long as you remain respectful of the culture of community on which MySpace was founded. They provide clear content

guidelines and reserve the right to enforce them at their discretion.

The jury is out regarding the impact MySpace's recent acquisition by News Corp will have on the enforcement of acceptable usage, but for now, as long as no other MySpace community member complains, you'll be okay. It would seem a user has to have some extremely unacceptable content or behavior to arouse the attention of MySpace's administrators."

Is MySpace just a fad? Perhaps, but it's a hot one, with benefits you should consider cashing in on for your home-based business. Social networking on the Internet is a growing trend, and a channel that shouldn't be neglected. **HBM**



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Don Lafferty is a writer, self marketing consultant and senior sales executive in the technology sector. His training programs, crafted for the 3M Corporation, Flextronics International, Avnet and others have strengthened the careers of thousands of sales people. To be Don's Friend, visit his MySpace at <http://www.myspace.com/donlafferty>.



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Setting up Your MySpace

Nothing is traditional about the MySpace environment, so set yours up with an open mind, and these materials.

- Digital pictures:** You'll need at least one picture — this will be the one everyone sees when they visit your MySpace page.
- Headline:** This is a phrase that will appear next to the default picture.
- About Me:** This is your pitch, so have this tightly written before you take your MySpace public.
- I'd like to Meet:** It's okay to say you'd like to meet Benjamin Franklin or Jeff Gordon if it says something about you or your business.

Additional sections allow you to list your interests, favorite movies, music, television programs, books, and heroes.

In the "Edit" mode, you'll provide basic details about yourself or your business.

The "Networking" link will take you to a screen where you can choose three detailed business categories for networking within the community. **HBM**

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