

Is ALA Ready for Social Networking?



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Being one of our Chapter's "Gen X" folks, I have to admit that I have always spent a lot of time online. Since I moved to Washington almost 10 years ago, online social networks have really taken off and have allowed me to keep in better contact with SO many people whom I would have otherwise forgotten. Some of the networks where you'll find my mug shot are Facebook, LinkedIN, and, yes, even MySpace. Did you just cringe? I saw you! It's OK. There's hope yet... for me and you!

Let's take a closer look at some of the interesting and diverse facts and opinions about Social Networking to see why it is that some people roll their eyes or stare in wonder when you bring these sites up in conversation. Times are changing! Do we wade or do we swim?

I admit it: I always enjoy being on the bleeding edge of technology. Most of the time it's because I actually find it useful, but there are occasions that I "take the plunge" so I can understand what "people in the know" are talking about. I've had the great fortune of never having destroyed anything with new technology (well, anything that couldn't be repaired... by someone... maybe not me... minor detail).

So, what is Online Social Networking? First off, the primary function of all online social networks is to allow you to search and find people from your past or people you want to know who have similar interests. From there you can send them a message (similar to an email) or you can "invite them" to be "your friend" or (in more professionally oriented networks) to "Join your professional network." Ever wonder where your first college roommate is living now? What about that person you dated in high school? OR (a very recent use) have you ever wanted to know how the world views your babysitter (is he/she really as nice as their parents think)? Much of this information can be found on one of these well-known Social Networks.

Let's take a look at the most popular:

1. The most prominent site is MySpace. Each individual (or association/company) has an individual page on a large network where they can share things about themselves with other people. On this page you have the ability to show everyone (or selective ones) photos, digital videos, blogs (sort of like an online diary), and many more intimate details about yourself. (I've read that MySpace is the third most visited website in the US and the sixth most visited in the World. With well over 100 million accounts, you can understand why.

2. Second, and one of the more recent contenders, is Facebook. Described by one of our members as a more "posh" MySpace, this site gives you similar capabilities for sharing information with people. One of the differences is you control the layout of pages more easily and you have control of how information is displayed on your page. Also, there are "add-on" features that can be nice: a world map to show "Where you've been," the ability to send a "virtual gift" to someone in your network (like a digital rose or a bottle of champagne for those hard days) and TONS of other things I don't yet understand. According to a Business Week article, in three years they have gained 50+ million users and grown by an estimated 150,000 users per day. They've added 1.5 million users in the three month span from May through July (article was published at the beginning of August). The 23-year-old CEO/founder, Mark Zuckerberg, claims that in the past three years it has doubled every six months. He developed Facebook while attending Harvard.

3. Third, the most "professionally acceptable" of the three, is LinkedIN (as in Linked In). LinkedIN caters more to working professionals trying to connect to one another. That said, this is not a place for a "group" or organization to have a presence (as of right now). Once you input your work history and your educational pedigree it starts working. It searches out other LinkedIN users who have worked at the same business and those who have also attended your schools and graduated in your class. It will also ask to scan all your contacts from Outlook or a number of the other online email accounts for other LinkedIN members. From there

you can write up professional and personal recommendations for people in your network, recommending their work, or recommending them as an employee or just as a generally good (or bad) person. My only current dislike about this network (and most other "professional" social networking sites) is that you can't create a "group" profile, which reduces the interactive possibilities.

So, where is all this going? Where does ALA (PSALA) come into the equation? Why do people dislike these networks? What are the advantages? Richard, what are you getting at?

I'll give the naysayer the first at bat. Disadvantages - Why do people generally dislike these sites? What's the source of the negative energy?

Online Social Networks were generally created for people to SOCIALIZE on. That said, the socializing can go to extremes in terms of the information that people want to reveal about themselves. Remember the comment about the babysitter? Well, true story, a colleague recently told me that before she hires a babysitter she searches MySpace for that person. And, if she finds that person has a very irresponsible profile posting, they don't get the job. Same situation for employers; another of our colleagues says she always searches MySpace for new employees!

Each person controls their own content and determines how much they want to "share" about different aspects of their lives (insert imagination here). As an individual, I can't do anything about what someone else posts on their MySpace page. Perhaps that's one of the frustrations. You do have control though. You don't have to "associate" with that person. You don't have to "befriend" them or join their network. You can have a completely clean, intelligent, and socially responsible page.

Now for the rebuttal (and you knew it was coming). I enjoy networking. Period. It's not always convenient (or healthy) to go out for drinks every night to meet new people or to connect with folks you already know. And, what if I feel like networking on a Saturday morning? Though, I guess I could go to the dog park... but that would require getting a dog! With online social

networking it's your timeline! No one can rush you or tell you when the "best time" is to network. It's always there and always flexible to fulfill your networking needs. Ever seen anything about the "six degrees of separation?" Well, on some of these sites you can see your connection to other people. So perhaps I find John Smith on LinkedIn and I see that John Smith went to high school with one of my attorneys (who must also be on LinkedIn, and many are). LinkedIn tells me how many degrees of separation there are between you and anyone else. If I need to make a business contact with John Smith it's a great lead-in to have a mutual connection.

Here's a second point; with Facebook you can create a "Group" page, like for the chapter or even your firm. On this page you can post general information about the organization (just as our website does), we can educate others about our purpose (existing or potential members OR the general public), we can post photos from events, we can post a calendar of events, we can share links for OUR use or the general Facebook audience.

This group page is a great way for all members of the group to interact. You can start "discussion topics." You can share links with the rest of your group. You can send a message to everyone in your group (only ON the network, doesn't go to email directly).

What appeals to me also is that the "creator" or "editor" (and there can be more than one) of the group can delete someone's photo posted on the group page, they can delete an inappropriate public discussion topic, and they can bar a member from participating or being associated with the group if that member posts topics, items, or activities that are not in good taste. This feature addresses all the activities that are the bases for many concerns about these sites.

What does this mean for PSALA? In the past year ALA International has issued a challenge to chapters to "increase their visibility." Seems like a pretty broad challenge, but that also means there are lots of avenues to choose to increase visibility. Does that mean we reach out for more exposure to: a) appeal to new members to build the chapter and the organization, b) increase industry awareness that administrators are professional managers, or c) advertise educational opportunities and educational certification

to develop a common knowledge in the industry of the professional growth benefits offered by the Chapter and the organization? Well, which is it? I say, d) All of the above and beyond! Why not reach out to the largest audience available? There are a LOT of great articles online right now about how non-profit associations are using these social networks to reach out to a new generation. There's even info about companies getting in on the action -- one article mentioned that Ernst & Young's Facebook pages have over 19,000 "friends" and Citigroup's Facebook pages have 8,700! These are big time organizations who wouldn't risk their company's reputation by "associating" with a community that would harm them. After all, they have control over who is a "friend" and they control the content. What's disreputable about that?

Could PSALA be the first ALA chapter to break ground in this realm? Well, I've taken a first step by creating a test "Group" on Facebook for PSALA and a test page on MySpace. Those addresses are: www.facebook.com/ and search for PSALA . For MySpace, go to www.myspace.com/puget-soundALA. In order to view the Facebook group you do have to sign up as a member. Keep in mind that if you sign up for an account you can always delete your account. It's very easy! If you'd rather view the page without creating an account let me know! I've created a login account so that folks can take a look without committing. Shoot me an email and I'll give you the login info.

We currently have 18 members on Facebook with 55 photos posted, three discussion topics, seven outside informational web links and a few scheduled events.

Will you be the next to join the ranks of the new millennium? It's easy to do and quite painless. ■

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Richard's disclaimer: please keep in mind that some firms have web filters that prevent anyone internally from accessing these websites because the general use is considered personal. On a similar note, be mindful when creating a profile on any of these networks. What you write is public. If you decide you want to use one of these networks for personal contacts and you don't want to mix business with pleasure, by all means create a second account!



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