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## Eyes on Business

# Social media is here to stay; it's time to jump in

**Premium content from Sacramento Business Journal - by Larry Mandelberg, Contributing writer**

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Social networking used to mean talking to your neighbors. Still does, but your neighbors aren't next door anymore; they're thousands of miles away in another country. Your only link is through common interests.

With all due respect to Robert Heinlein, I feel like a stranger in a strange land. Yes, I am a boomer. Yes, I struggle to connect to Gen Xers and Gen Yers. They don't think the way I do. They don't act the way I do. What's funny to them makes no sense to me, and vice versa. For the first time in my 50-plus years I am starting to feel irrelevant.

The world I have known since I started working at age 8 has left me in the dust. The business community is losing post-World War II vets and us boomers. We are being replaced by Gen Xers and Gen Yers, and I have not been preparing myself for it.

Generation Y, typically thought of as those born between 1977 and 1994, is taking over. Gen Yers are having a dramatic social and economic impact. They are racially and ethnically diverse, independent, technologically savvy, and they feel empowered.

The greatest change facing businesses today is not the economic meltdown or current financial difficulties. It is these permanently changing demographics.

### **It's all about relationships**

The shifting population makes social networking a critically important model to understand and, for most, to embrace. The number of baby boomers is shrinking and there are more Gen Yers than any other demographic group. If you're interested in being in business, the people you'll need to connect with and do business with are those Gen Yers.

They don't communicate through traditional media. They don't read the newspaper, watch the news or listen to the radio.

They read blogs, watch podcasts on their iPhones, and they tweet on Twitter.com. According to Kit Stookey, principal of **Practical Matters Consulting**, "Social networking is considered a key communication tool. Some say it could replace business cards."

Social networking is all about creating relationships. It's about target marketing and zeroing in on the people you want to reach in a specific and well defined manner.

It's about being extremely clear on who those ideal customers are and tailoring your communication to them with personal and precise messages.

### **Don't invade, invite**

Sound like classic marketing? The difference is you no longer invade, you invite. Rather than injecting your marketing message into their lives, you invite them into yours. The bait is the interesting information you are dangling throughout the Internet. The hook is the helpful and valuable information you give away.

Debi Hammond, president and chief executive of Sacramento public relations firm Merlot Marketing, and a social networking expert, says, "Many companies view social media as an insignificant supplement to a marketing campaign. Social media has changed the marketing landscape and marketers need to change the way they communicate."

Allow me to repeat myself — social networking can be described quite simply as being all about creating relationships, not selling. It has the benefit of being attractive, not invasive. It is about dangling information out and trolling for those who want to communicate with you, not about trying to enter someone else's space to get them to listen to you.

"The way to empower your social network is ... to feed it. You will be remembered for what you did and not just what you asked for," says Renee Bosley, a commercial loan officer.

Social networking is about creating a sense of desire; giving people valuable content, information and insights; and helping them. Through that help, relationships are born, and through the relationships, a market develops.

### **Dinosaurs once ruled the earth**

The reality is I am a bit of a dinosaur myself. I still struggle to see the linkage between marketing and sales with the social networking model. That's because it's a different model, and that link just doesn't exist in it. That's the bad news.

The good news is this: Much of what has caused this shift is the ability to be highly targeted with your messages. You no longer have to waste time or dollars communicating to markets that have no interest in what you are selling.

I don't believe television or newspapers are going away any time soon. I do believe every business that fails to embrace social networking will eventually become as relevant as a buggy whip manufacturer. Now that I think about it, are there any buggy whip manufacturers left?

Tweets, peeps, blogs and iPhones — sounds like a script from a '50s sci-fi thriller. Hold on, Toto, we're not in Kansas anymore. OK, OK, I finally got the social networking bug. I'm interested, and I'm getting in the water.

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