

## Six Degrees of Social Networking

I'm only three degrees from Kevin Bacon. And I'm three degrees from Hillary Clinton. In fact, I'm only two degrees from Barack Obama. (Sadly, Cal Ripken, Jr. is out of my network.)

How do I know this? Because LinkedIn tells me so.

LinkedIn and other networking services like Facebook, Twitter, StartUp Nation, Qapacity, Classmates.com exist for one reason: **to connect people with other people**. The reason for the connection and the tone of the introduction may vary depending on the networking site, but the mission is still the same.

Social networking sites are the virtual equivalent of, "I know a guy who knows a guy." And since most folks want to be helpful in some way, they're usually more than happy to introduce you to "the guy."

How to request and make use of that introduction is really the point of this article. How can you use your social networking sites most successfully? There are six degrees for that, too:

- **First Degree: Populate yourself.** Join several social networks. Make sure they're relevant to your business and personality profile so that you can reach more appropriate targets (it won't help you if you're the only adult professional with a MySpace page). Familiarize yourself with each one you use and join groups so you can build a community. Networking is a numbers game; make the numbers work for you.
- **Second Degree: Find the target.** Every social networking site offers you a way to "find people." If there's a specific person you want to meet (say, the purchasing manager of your dream client), look for them...everywhere. Check all of your networks (per the first degree) so you don't miss any opportunities.
- **Third Degree: Learn who your target is.** This idea holds true whether your target is a hoped-for client, a potential employee or a long-lost friend. Before you reach out to this person, you want to know as much as you can about them. Where do they work now and where have they worked in the past? What are their hobbies? Do they volunteer somewhere? Get to know and understand them, and your overtures will be more informed...and more readily received.
- **Fourth Degree: Look for the connectors.** There's a social theory that proposes that some people in the world are connectors. They're the folks who know someone in every city...in every walk of life...who do every conceivable job. And more importantly, these connectors delight in introducing those people to others. Chances are, if your target is well-known in the industry or community,



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the connectors *you* know will know someone who can help get you to your target.

Sometimes, you may find that you have several connectors who can help you reach your target. If that's the case, start with the strongest one for the initial intro but don't lose sight of your "supporting connectors." If your target perceives that you know many of the same people, they'll see you as a valuable connection and wonder why you haven't crossed paths before.

- **Fifth Degree: Think about what you want.** There's nothing more uncomfortable than being introduced to someone at a cocktail and, after the initial three minutes of conversation, having nothing to say to them. Believe it or not, that same awkwardness is possible online as well. So before you ask your connector to make the introduction, think about what you're trying to accomplish by this communication. Do you want a new board member for your pet nonprofit? Do you want to find out if a potential new-hire is worth training? Do you want to secure an appointment with a hard-to-reach prospect? Plan it out in advance so you have a ready follow-up after the initial contact.
- **Sixth Degree: Seek out the introduction.** Now that you know who you want to reach, how you want to reach them, and what you want to accomplish, it's time to make the ask. Be specific in your inquiry to your connector. And make sure they're comfortable connecting you with your target. If for some reason they aren't, don't give up: ask for an alternative option. Try something like, "I can understand that this request could put you in an awkward position since you're no longer working with that client. Do you know someone else who could introduce me?" Or maybe, "How would you recommend I try to connect with them if not through you?"

Actively using your social network to develop a community takes time, and it can be uncomfortable the first time or two. But once you get the hang of it, you'll be amazed at how time-efficient it can be and wonder how you ever got along without it.

So, what's next? Go forth and network!

Next month, we'll discuss how you can make your website "Flashier"!



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