

# Social Media Fiction

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“Guess what? I have a hundred friends on Facebook.” This was what my teenage daughter reported to me one day. I congratulated her, but I’m not sure why. Social research shows that close friends to whom one speaks regularly are rarely more than six or seven individuals, and it is no different in social media. Looking at my daughter’s day-to-day contacts that research proves accurate. So, what does she do with the 93 other individuals? To some she might speak occasionally. To others, rarely or not at all. If she posts information about herself, the 93 can follow her activity, if they choose, but her communication is largely one way. My daughter’s experience isn’t unusual. It is typical of how most users of Facebook and LinkedIn employ these web utilities.

The question arises then of the value of expansive linking. Does it waste time or does one gain something from it? Secondly, what can communicators reap, if anything, from such social fiction of networking? We will tackle these questions in three ways:

- Examine what Facebook and LinkedIn promise.
- Analyze the communications value of their services.
- Discuss the ways organizations use Facebook and LinkedIn today.

## Facebook and LinkedIn

Facebook describes itself thus:

Founded in February 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment.

LinkedIn’s description states:

Your professional network of trusted contacts gives you an advantage in your career, and is one of your most valuable assets. LinkedIn exists to help you make better use of your professional network and help the people you trust in return. Our mission is to connect the world’s professionals to make them more productive and successful. We believe that in a global connected economy, your success as a professional and your

competitiveness as a company depends upon faster access to insight and resources you can trust...You can find, be introduced to, and collaborate with qualified professionals that you need to work with to accomplish your goals.... You can...form enduring connections by inviting trusted contacts to join LinkedIn and connect to you. Your network consists of your connections, your connections' connections, and the people they know, linking you to a vast number of qualified professionals and experts.

Facebook promises efficient communication with friends, family and coworkers. LinkedIn promises efficient communication with trusted contacts. Three elements are common among the services – trust, relationship and communication. Facebook emphasizes its “trusted environment” but it targets its service to trusted individuals, people whom the user knows. LinkedIn also references people whom one knows -- “trusted contacts” -- with clear reference to reciprocal behavior based on trust. If you know and trust another, you can relate to and/or work with the person comfortably, and the person in turn can relate to and/or work comfortably with you. (There is idealism underlying this premise. Knowing another person well does not mean you can trust the person. In fact, it might mean exactly the opposite.)

Both services imply that communications allow these software services to complement or replace face-to-face relationships. While it is true that social media services can complement relationships already formed, it is less so that they are a source of relationships unto themselves without face-to-face familiarity. That is, LinkedIn and Facebook by extension of “friending” imply that one can communicate to another lesser known individual and form an enduring bond of trust with that person. People have built trusting relationships solely through correspondence for millennia, but they are a minority of relationships formed. Most people still rely on face-to-face engagement as a condition of establishing trust with good reason. It is important to get a sense of another individual that might not show in writing, in photos or even video clips.

However, the greatest weaknesses of Facebook and LinkedIn aren't in their software. Rather, they are in how humans use their software. People “friend” or link to people they don't know and hence, cannot trust. Although one might have a narrow network of friends to whom one communicates regularly, there is perceived value in having a larger network. There is psychic comfort in “connection,” even though it is as much illusion as reality. However, this weakens a social media system built on trust when people connect for connection alone and not for interaction. That is, they don't want a two-way relationship, only a one-way link. Moreover, while the two services assume one will spend time fostering relationships through communication, this is not true for most people. They don't want to communicate. In fact, excessive communication may cause people to disconnect from another.

In reality, users of Facebook and LinkedIn form networks within networks – people they actually talk to versus those to whom they connect but don't relate. They

might send an insight or story to 100 people but discuss it only with four or five. In other words, they treat most people in their networks as secondary acquaintances to whom they communicate unidirectionally. These secondary acquaintances form a database of contacts and links much like a directory of addresses. One keeps them on file for times when there might be an occasion for communication, but such times are rare. They are contacts to whom one might send an annual holiday card but not much more.

If a communicator is to use the communications possibilities of Facebook and LinkedIn well, then one challenge might be to understand where two-way relationships reside within largely unidirectional computer links. Network tracing of the frequency and quality of communications among participants can partially achieve this, but is it worth doing? Another challenge is to understand the importance of two-way relationships by comparison to unidirectional links in terms of communications effectiveness.

### **Communications value**

Communications value is the effectiveness of message-sender, message and medium in:

- creating awareness in an intended message recipient;
- supplying information to support decision making;
- getting the message recipient to take action; and in
- maintaining the recipient's positive support.

The communicator's job is to reduce distance between message sender and message recipient in order to build a relationship and common understanding. This is a challenge when indiscriminate linking happens on Facebook and LinkedIn. Links do not equal relationship. Furthermore, promiscuous linking and "friending" reduce the credibility of networking in both services.

Three other elements also affect value:

- **Utility:** Does a targeted message recipient use the medium? One may have thousands of Facebook "friends" and hundreds of LinkedIn links, but few of them might be a target for an organization's key messages. They might be an entirely separate self-identified group that has little relation to the organization one represents and its messages.
- **Distance:** The closer a recipient is to a message sender in terms of language, geography, sociocultural beliefs, lifestyle, shared experience and understanding, the easier it is for a message to be communicated and the higher the communications value. Or, to cite a cliché, it is easier to preach to the choir than to sinners. In social media terms, the farther away in a

network an individual is, the less credibility that individual has and hence, less communications value in terms of achieving an effective response. One cannot know with hundreds of “friends” and links what the distance might be between them and the participant who puts up a Facebook or LinkedIn page.

- Noise: The more messages competing for one’s attention, the greater the difficulty to get a specific message through. This is especially true for networks in which there are more links than relationships and more indiscriminate messaging than discussion.

Personal networks in Facebook and LinkedIn may form around ideas, products or services, associations and shared experiences. Networks may be vital to one’s daily living or tenuous and isolated from one’s other life experiences. For example, one might belong to an alumni club or professional association. One can choose to be a booster or just a name in a directory of the club or association. The degree and type of relationship is up to the individual, and the individual sets the parameters of a relationship. For example, although one might discuss daily events with another through Wall postings on Facebook, one might not be open to a sales pitch from the other. The individual defines the relationship as strictly social. On the other hand, if a Facebook page or a LinkedIn site is set up as an organization’s venture, the individual who comes to the site implicitly accepts the chance that he or she will be pitched for something.

Can one have a common ground or shared experience with someone whom one barely knows when linking to that person through social media? It is less likely. The psychic value of belonging may be too weak in a secondary medium like Facebook and LinkedIn to have much communications value.

### **Using Facebook and LinkedIn**

Many organizations today use Facebook and LinkedIn as unidirectional message-sending of organization and product and service information rather than two-way relationship-building. Providing information about oneself increases the possibility of relationship through heightening awareness but does not assure it, and it is the weakest form of relationship envisioned by Facebook and LinkedIn. These organizations use Facebook and LinkedIn as just another web page – as ancillary online channels – targeted more or less to a demographic. They are quite likely on Facebook and LinkedIn because someone in the organization felt they should be there, but they are making no effort to expand two-way relationships.

Some organizations engage in interactivity to involve users with a brand or product, but they appear to be a minority. What they are doing, however, could be done as easily on a web page rather than social medium, such as an interactive map where travelers can post notes about what they are seeing, a page where one can insert pictures of friends on athletes’ bodies, an interactive program enabling teens to “dance” with animated characters. Actual one-to-one

relationship building appears to be negligible and pushing buttons is not a trusted relationship.

Several organizations, especially companies with consumer products, have fan sites that apparently run without approval from the organizations. It is unclear what value these sites have to organizations if they fail to communicate with them, especially if these self-directed groups turn negative toward an organization's actions.

Theoretically, social media sites should be of value when persuading an individual to make a decision. Establishing desire leading to decision-making is an activity that moves from a more general audience to individual choice. By time one reaches a decision point, communications is localized. One consults more with those whom he knows and trusts and less with those whom he doesn't know. For effective social media communications at the point of decision, there needs to be someone who is recognized, believed in and available to the person making the choice. However, this is difficult to achieve when real networks of friends are no more than six or seven individuals. There is some effort on the part of organizations using interactivity to reach the network within a network of contacts, but it appears to be minor.

There is plentiful evidence of organizations using Facebook for reinforcement of brand image and LinkedIn as a way for employees to connect. Neither requires the closeness of a two-way relationship, however. For example, Ford Motor has a Facebook page for Mustang fans and a LinkedIn page for employees in the Detroit area. Both have thousands of links. Disney World has a Facebook fan page for visitors and a LinkedIn page for employees in the tens of thousands of links. So too, The Hershey Company with a Facebook page for devotees of its chocolate and a LinkedIn page for employees in hundreds of links. Vanity Fair, the lifestyle magazine, keeps a Facebook page for readers but relies on its parent, Conde Nast, for an employee LinkedIn page.

## Summary

To say that one has "friends" in social media is mostly a misuse of the term. One has acquaintances or desired acquaintances but few close friends with whom one shares information and from whom one might solicit advice. But the idea of friends and professional links is a useful fiction for the online world. Communicators should not be sucked in by the fiction. It is as difficult communicating through social media as it is through traditional media – and always will be.

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