

Business

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Test Drive | Keying into Internet's capacity for connecting

Networking sites expand the concept of finding jobs or love via friends of friends or associates of associates.

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When venture capitalists proposed plowing \$10 million into Gestalt L.L.C., a King of Prussia information technology firm, Bill Loftus decided he needed help vetting their proposal.

"I needed to bring myself up to date on issues like what ownership shares venture capitalists were asking for now, what provisions they put in the contract to protect themselves, why they were asking for them," owner Loftus said.

The best advisers would be other venture capitalists. But too many of those he had once dealt with had moved to new firms or other parts of the country.

Rather than waste time tracking them down, Loftus looked to LinkedIn, a Web-based network he had recently joined.

Almost immediately, he was in touch with experts who gave him the advice he needed to successfully negotiate the proposed investment.

Online social and business networks such as LinkedIn and Friendster combine the communications power of the Internet with the notion that friends of your friends, or associates of your associates, can lead to the next exciting job or the next great date.

Their selling pitch boils down to this: You are more likely to find a valued executive, or the love of your life, by meeting someone through a trusted network of friends and colleagues than by browsing through Monster.com or Match.com.

Millions have responded to the philosophy by joining the online networks - 7.3 million at Friendster alone, according to Jupiter Research analyst Nate Elliott.

The argument has also sounded good to venture capitalists and other investors who have poured about \$30 million into the networking sites.

If you are thinking about joining a network, what can you expect? Here, a look at the leading networks:

Ryze. Anyone can join. Membership is free, but the network offers a \$9.95 monthly plan that provides additional benefits, such as the ability to do advanced searches for other members by company and university affiliation, among other criteria.

Ryze offers scores of networks, although the four biggest networks, with memberships ranging to 6,500 people, revolve around business.

Ryze networks also organize live-world mixers and events.

ZeroDegrees. Anyone can join. Primarily a business-oriented network, ZeroDegrees is distinguished by a clean, simple interface.

On signing in, you can immediately invite friends to join the network, to search your network for links to people who may be of help, and to request an introduction to those on your network who are separated from you by several degrees.

ZeroDegrees is currently free, but expects eventually to institute a fee of about \$10 a month.

LinkedIn. LinkedIn is all about business and professional connections. You have to be invited by an existing member to join.

In many respects, it is the most focused of the networks, providing a straightforward search utility for finding contacts and a utility for creating requests for introductions.

LinkedIn is currently free, but is contemplating fees.

Friendster. Anyone can join. One of the first social networks, it also has grown into one of the largest.

As the name implies, it is primarily oriented to social networking: finding dates, friends, or partners for specific activities, among other things.

Members can search for contacts using a wide variety of criteria.

Membership is free, but fees are under consideration for some services.

Tribe. Anyone can join.

Members can browse through job listings and services, as well as an area where members can ask for recommendations on assorted issues.

Tribe's greatest lures are the sub-tribes - ranging from a 17-member tribe interested in singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams to a 1,600-plus group hot to coalesce around 2004 political issues - and the live events organized by tribes.

Membership is free.

(Knight-Ridder Inc., The Inquirer's parent company, is an investor in Tribe.)

Orkut. An offshoot of Google, Orkut is a by-invitation-only network. Membership is free.

Orkut aims to connect friends, activity partners, business networkers, and people looking for dates.

You can look for all those people by using a search utility, but also by browsing through its communities, including those organized around religion, computers, travel, and alumni clubs, among many.

Its profiling questionnaire will take a long time and a lot of soul-searching to answer, typical questions being, "From my past relationships I learned..." and, "In my bedroom you will find..."

The appeal of networking

Online networking seems to have a strong appeal, even luring people who were once skeptical about the concept.

Peter Fader, a Wharton marketing professor who says he is a former doubter, now belongs to LinkedIn.

He says his network has grown to 90 people, including at last one professional contact with whom he was happy to reconnect after several years.

Network benefits, Fader says, also have accrued to at least one of his students.

"She asked me to refer her to someone whom I found on LinkedIn, which I did," he says. "Later she told me that it resulted in a conversation that was literally career-changing."

Still, there are other elements you should consider if you are tempted to join a network, beyond thinking about all the friends and career opportunities you will encounter:

Privacy. Many of the networks belong to TRUSTe, which was organized to foster sound privacy standards for Web sites.

However, given the amount of personal information you have to post on network sites, it is still a good idea to read through the privacy policies of the networks you are considering, especially if they do not display the TRUSTe logo.

Exposure. While it may be beneficial to be able to reach out to people who are three degrees or more removed from you, how much will you relish getting a continuing stream of dating or investment proposals from strangers?

If you don't want to be inundated by offers, consider only a network that allows you to put constraints on approaches.

Expense. If you are joining a network that has fees or will eventually implement some, you may want to consider paying only for specific one-time services or subscribing on a month-to-month basis.

The betting among the experts is that the networking field will thin considerably in the months ahead. You don't want to have a prepaid 12-month membership in a network that may be on shaky ground.

On the Web

www.friendster.com

www.linkedin.com

www.orkut.com

www.tribe.net

www.ryze.com

www.zerodegrees.com

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