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EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Practical LinkedIn

By Randy Hain, Managing Partner of Bell Oaks

How we build personal and business connections is ever evolving, and in today's culture and economic environment it is a constantly moving target to keep up with the latest tools and trends. One of the fastest growing connecting tools of the past few years is LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com). A recent search of their website revealed that LinkedIn has more than 34 million members in 200 countries, and is adding new ones at the rate of 1.2 million a month. Consider these statistics:

- All 500 of the *Fortune* 500 are represented on LinkedIn. In fact, 499 of them are represented by director-level and above employees
- More than 1.4 million members self-identify as senior executives
- Most members tend to be between 30 and 55 years old
- LinkedIn is intended to appeal to its average user: the 41-year-old, white-collar professional with an income of \$109,000 a year

For the purpose of this article, I make two basic assumptions: you are familiar with the Web site and you are interested in expanding your network for personal or professional reasons. With these assumptions in mind, let's explore different ways to approach LinkedIn, paradigm shifts among users of the site, and best and worst practices.

LinkedIn Philosophy

"I have a profile, now what do I do?" This is the question I hear most often. Whether you are a job seeker, a sales professional, a recruiter or simply interested in making new connections, you will see your best results by approaching LinkedIn with this mindset:

1. **Have a "pay it forward" attitude.** Be open and willing to help people connect to your network and accept invitations.
2. **Focus on finding people you *don't* know.** This seems obvious, but it can be easy to fall into the habit of "collecting" contacts you already know. I find the real value of LinkedIn is connecting with people of different backgrounds and capabilities who can help you with your objective.
3. **Reach out to those people you *don't* know.** A majority of people on LinkedIn are open to networking, so don't be afraid to introduce yourself. Networking is likely why they joined in the first place.
4. **View LinkedIn as an enormous spider web.** Your direct connections and their connections and their connection's connections are all part of your network. So, get as many direct connections as possible to ensure that you can run searches within a very large population.
5. **Be transparent in your profile and complete it fully.** Give clear descriptions of the jobs you have had and always include a bio under the Summary section. Also, I advocate sharing personal interests, charitable causes you support, hobbies, affinity and social groups, faith, etc. We will review why this is important later.
6. **Recognize that the Internet does not allow you to hide.** In the age of Google, it is practically impossible to hide work and personal information. Utilize LinkedIn to showcase the information you want to share. Therefore with the typically high placement of LinkedIn profiles in Google searches, you are likely to have this seen first by others.

WWW.BELLOAKS.COM

O 678.287.2000 F 678.287.2001

One Glenlake Parkway Suite 1000 Atlanta, Georgia 30328

7. **Don't let LinkedIn serve as a substitute for human interaction.** Any people-oriented business thrives on relationships and face-to-face meetings. Utilize this tool to make the connection and build a bridge, but follow up with a phone call and a meeting.

These approaches to working with and maximizing what LinkedIn offers have served me well. And it continues to evolve as my needs change and the technology becomes more sophisticated over time.

Paradigm Shifts

I am always keenly interested in how different people use LinkedIn and I routinely ask clients, candidates, friends and peers for their perspectives. The results may surprise you. Here is what I have learned over the last couple years:

- Many of my clients look at a candidate's profile on LinkedIn before he or she comes in for an interview. Their intent is to gain insight into the more personal side of the candidate as well as to check for resume inconsistencies. Don't let this scare you! Sharing the right personal information just might give you the edge you need to land the position.
- A number of my friends in professional services utilize LinkedIn to research their client prospects and gain a competitive advantage by being well informed. The ability to discuss different aspect of a person's professional and personal history adds depth and distinctiveness to the conversation. Candidates often do the same with prospective employers.
- LinkedIn is becoming an excellent way build a *personal brand*. Be deliberate in how you use this channel to market yourself and your particular areas of expertise. You should consider adding a link to your LinkedIn profile at the bottom of your e-mail signature. This is becoming very common and I think it is a great idea.
- Corporate recruiters and executive search firms, including my own, have finally realized that LinkedIn is a rich source of high-quality candidates and use it as a primary recruiting source.
- Company managers are frequently looking at their *own* employee profiles to learn personal information for a variety of reasons. They also look to see if employees are job hunting, so use caution when checking the box that says you are interested in "Career Opportunities!"

There are likely countless others, but these are the shifts I'm hearing about most frequently. Just to reiterate, there are no secrets on the Internet and you have complete control over the content you share on LinkedIn. You must simply exercise good judgment.

Best and Worst Practices

In general, aren't we interested in learning a better way of doing things? Adopt that strategy with LinkedIn. Nobody has all the answers, so an open mind and willingness to innovate will serve you well when turning this into an effective tool. Here is a sample of the best and worst LinkedIn practices I have observed. First, the **Best Practices**:

1. **Look at LinkedIn daily**, especially the Home page to track movement in your network that may benefit you—job changes, promotions, new connections, etc. You can also see if anyone from your school has joined LinkedIn and look at the people who have viewed your profile that day.
2. **Upgrade your account to the first level of pay service.** The entry (free) level of LinkedIn is tedious if you are using it to make a large number of connections. Pay for the first upgrade level so you can connect to people in your network directly, and not wait weeks for a referral.
3. **Have a transparent profile that will attract broad interest.** You are *screening in* and not *screening out* on LinkedIn and it is important to connect with as many people as possible in the network. A broader sharing of your background is likely to gain more contacts for you and allow

you to connect with others with similar backgrounds. Also, list personal and business accomplishments that will help showcase your achievements.

4. **Have at least 10 Recommendations on your profile.** Recommendations are analogous to a good Seller rating on eBay—you are viewed as credible and more likely to get a call back if a viewer sees that people think highly of you. You can recommend people in your network and they will be prompted to recommend you in return. This is a good “pay it forward” strategy.
5. **When looking for people, run Boolean searches for prospects by keywords relevant to your background.** My examples include “University of Georgia,” “Cub Scouts” and “Catholic.” Search any key words relevant and important to you that will help build a connection to someone who shares these words in their profile. Keep playing with key words and companies you are interested in until you find people you would like to meet.
6. **Focus on contacts that can help you get to the right person.** Don’t focus exclusively on finding the decision maker, you’ll only be disappointed. Look for people in the target organization who share common interests, schools or LinkedIn connections with you. They are more likely to want to help you and make a friendly introduction to the right person—it’s so much more effective than a cold call. However, if you can’t establish common ground with someone in a target company, the cold contact may be necessary.
7. **Always offer to help someone BEFORE asking for help.** When reaching out via InMail (assuming you now have the upgraded LinkedIn account), never state your desire/need in the opening sentence. You’re not likely to get anywhere fast. I’ve had success with this approach: “John: I came across your background on LinkedIn and noticed that we both are UGA alums and involved in Cub Scouts. I run an executive search firm here in Atlanta and am always looking to grow my network. Would you be open to a call this week and perhaps a cup of coffee? I would like to see if there are ways I can help you and maybe we can share stories of our college days! You can check out my firm at www.belloaks.com and I can be reached directly at (678) 287-2000. I look forward to hearing from you. Thanks, Randy Hain”
8. **Invite every person you meet to join your network.** This will help build your list of direct connections and expand your searchable pool. Mention when you meet that you will connect with them on LinkedIn to increase your chance of an accepted invitation.
9. **Join Groups to enhance your searches and help you be strategically identified.** You can join affinity Groups on LinkedIn in almost every category ranging from Alumni Associations to HR Executives to Faith Groups. Groups become “safe havens” where you can easily gain new connections, share in discussions, etc. Choose wisely because your profiles are visible to everyone in that network and your choices should not raise eyebrows (like Recovering Shopaholics!).
10. **Make good use of LinkedIn Answers** to get feedback on tough questions from your network. This usually nets a good response and gives you additional exposure to your network on their home pages.
11. **Utilize the “I am working on…” feature at the top of your profile.** This is a great way to let your network what you are working on and draw attention to your profile when it shows up on their home page.
12. **The Reading List** is a new feature on LinkedIn which allows you to share the books you recommend on your profile. This is another great way to share insight into how you think and what you like.

Now, the *Worst Practices*:

1. **Join LinkedIn, develop a profile and don’t accept new contacts or requests for help.** Why go to the trouble if you are not going to use it? It won’t put you on a secret “bad” list, but don’t waste your time if you aren’t willing to utilize the true value of LinkedIn. Also, if the tables are turned one day and you need help, these people will remember.
2. **Abuse your network.** Be careful not to go to the same people again and again for referrals. They should be open to the request, but too many requests will create negative feelings and burn a bridge.

3. **Be afraid to reach out to people you don't know.** This is a common stumbling block. Remember that LinkedIn users are generally open to referral requests and direct contact. Direct connections to people with whom you share something in common will accelerate your business development, recruiting or connecting efforts exponentially.
4. **I don't want my information "out there" on the Internet, so I won't share much.** I hate to tell you, but it is already "out there." Google yourself and if you are a business professional with any experience, you probably show up. Show your career information and use discretion when sharing the personal information if you prefer. Remember, you control what is shared. This is the direction technology is taking us, so I encourage you to try and manage it!
5. **Don't share access to your connections.** If you plan to ask others for access to their connections, you must be willing to share yours. Some people do use LinkedIn as a kind of master contact manager, but I argue that part of the value of the network is open and transparent sharing of information and referrals. If someone you don't know or trust asks for a referral to one of your connections, simply say "no."
6. **Don't fill out your profile completely.** You can't make LinkedIn work for you unless you have a profile that legitimizes you as a credible professional. I see many half-completed profiles and I wonder how many opportunities they miss.

There are literally thousands of articles out there on how to use LinkedIn, so I certainly don't profess to have all the answers. Most of what I do on LinkedIn has been self-taught through experimentation, observing others' best practices, and logically evaluating what works best for me. Our firm generated 24 percent of our 2007 revenue from LinkedIn client and candidate sources—2006 was about the same. So clearly there can be a significant ROI in utilizing LinkedIn effectively.

Starting today, view LinkedIn as an enormous network of potential new friends but with a word of advice—don't let it become one of the omnipresent technological devices that make it so easy to hide behind. LinkedIn should be used as a catalyst, not a substitute, for human interaction and conversation.

Employ a "pay it forward" strategy of helping others through referrals and recommendations. Operate out of enlightened self-interest as you reach out to people and offer to help them first. Ask for what you want later, after rapport and common interests have been established. Use LinkedIn to promote your personal brand and develop your profile as a marketing showcase that will attract others. LinkedIn has become an effective networking tool for me and I hope it becomes the same for you.

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Randy Hain is Managing Partner and Shareholder of Bell Oaks (www.belloaks.com), a nationally-recognized executive search firm. He has an established track record of leading successful searches and building teams in diverse industries and functional specializations ranging from individual contributors to C-level leadership. He has played the lead role in hiring, training and developing of one of the most successful search consultant teams in the business, and has earned a reputation as a values-based leader who invests heavily in his colleagues, candidates and clients. Randy's deep sense of community is reflected in his work and that of the Partners of Bell Oaks. He may be reached at rhain@belloaks.com.

With a nearly 40-year legacy in executive search, Bell Oaks specializes in identifying, attracting and hiring professionals to critical positions with companies across the country. Founded in 1970, the national firm has particular expertise in the areas of sales and marketing, human resources, finance and accounting, information technology, and manufacturing/operations/engineering. Bell Oaks is consistently ranked as one of the leading search firms in the South and was recently named one of Atlanta's Best Places to Work by the Atlanta Business Chronicle for the third consecutive year.