

Using LinkedIn Groups for B2B business development: A primer

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ABSTRACT

LinkedIn Groups are more than a venue where professionals with similar interests can meet and have industry-related discussions. If they are used properly, Groups also can be employed as a means to develop business; that is, they can be a part of the B2B marketing mix. This paper, the third in a series of real-world-focused web marketing primers developed by the authors, focuses on the use of LinkedIn Groups in business-to-business (B2B) marketing campaigns. The topic is an interesting one since many educators and students primarily think of LinkedIn as a business-oriented social networking site, rather than a site with marketing potential.

Keywords: LinkedIn Groups, B2B marketing, business development, web marketing primer.

INTRODUCTION

While most college and university marketing students know they can benefit to some degree from sitting through lectures that summarize and explain the textbook subject matter, most instructors have casually observed that the typical college student really appreciates narratives drawn from the “real world” of marketing. Because of this, the authors determined that it would be beneficial to write several real-world-based, web-marketing-focused primers, designed to supplement traditional textbook-based lectures. Each draws extensively on the web marketing consulting experiences of one of the authors, as well as on the research he conducted during the process of writing several books for the web marketing trade audience. This paper, the third of these primers, focuses on the use of LinkedIn Groups in business-to-business (B2B) marketing campaigns. The topic is an interesting one since many educators and students primarily think of LinkedIn as a business-oriented social networking site, rather than a site with marketing potential.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

Today, much of the “talk” about businesses’ products and/or services takes place on social networking Web sites. Social networking in its present form is a relatively new phenomenon. Back in 2001, online bulletin boards and online services (i.e., CompuServe and America Online) facilitated some basic social networking, but 2001 was at least one year before the social networking began its amazing increase in popularity.

Friendster, which many see as the first really successful social networking site, came into existence in 2002. Friendster’s social networking focus was based on what it referred to as a “Circle of Friends.” Friendster Circles were built on the belief that that an interestingly connected online community can exist only between participants who have clearly identified and mutually accepted bonds. Indeed, Friendster made certain that it provided its users with several paths to discovering those bonds. Although it realized some early successes, problems with its technology and other glitches prompted Friendster to totally give up on social networking. Today, Friendster exists as a gaming-focused site.

MySpace, which led the field of social networking sites for a number of years, also established its online presence in 2003, the same year that LinkedIn launched (more on LinkedIn later in this paper). Over the years, however, recreational use of Myspace fell to the point that it mainly exists today as a platform where bands and musicians can network.

In 2004, Facebook, the present world-wide leader in the social networking arena with more than 1.3 billion active users, came online. Two years later (i.e., 2006), Twitter, which claims over 100 million active users today, launched.

Finally, Google threw its hat into the social networking arena when its Google+ site began operating in 2007. Google+ attracted 25 million users in its first month of operation, a user base that increased to over 540 million by 2014. (Note: For a more detailed discussion of the history of social networking, see (Digital Trends, 2014) which provided the framework for the preceding discussion.)

A CLOSER LOOK AT LINKEDIN

LinkedIn, which reports a current membership of approximately 400 million, went live 2003 with the objective of being a social network for business people who desire to connect with other business people. Today, the company states its mission as follows:

... To connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful. When you join LinkedIn, you get access to people, jobs, news, updates, and insights that help you be great at what you do (LinkedIn, 2016a).

Although most individuals think “business networking” when they hear LinkedIn’s name, the company offers B2B marketers a number of opportunities to market their products and services. While this paper focuses on B2B marketers can use LinkedIn’s recently overhauled Groups feature (defined below), one can get a much broader introduction to the use of LinkedIn in the marketing process by reading “The Sophisticated Marketer’s Guide to LinkedIn,” which was written by Jason Miller, LinkedIn Marketing Solutions’ Senior Content Marketing Manager (Miller, 2015). Appendix A includes a brief lexicon of LinkedIn terminology that should prove useful as one continues reading this primer.

LinkedIn Groups

According to its business website, “LinkedIn Groups provide a place for professionals in the same industry or with similar interests to share content, find answers, post and view jobs, make business contacts, and establish themselves as industry experts (LinkedIn, 2016b).”

The marketer can locate potential groups to join through the use of the “Search” feature, which is located at the top of LinkedIn homepage, or by perusing the company’s suggestions of groups that may fit his/her interests. The marketer also can establish a new group that focuses on an individual industry or topic (LinkedIn, 2016b).

Historically, LinkedIn Groups were places where B2B companies and marketers could go to share in thoughtful and potentially beneficial industry-related conversations. Over time, however, that changed as these Groups increasingly became overrun with spam and self-serving promotions. The reasons for this change appear to be two-fold. First, many group owners, managers, and moderators neglected to block unwanted content. Second, LinkedIn itself gave groups the choice to go public, which allowed the un-vetted to join at will. LinkedIn seems to own up to these problems at (LinkedIn, 2016c).

The aforementioned issues seem to have been addressed by LinkedIn in its redesigned Groups feature, which launched in October of 2015. LinkedIn reports that the reasons for the changes are “to increase the value of group conversions and make Groups a more trustworthy place to meet with like-minded professionals (LinkedIn, 2016c)”. Briefly summarized, the most important redesigned features include:

- More engaging, higher-quality conversations Members can now add images and mention other group members in discussions.
- Less clutter LinkedIn promises a lesser amount of spam and promotions.
- Anytime, anywhere access LinkedIn launched an iOS app in late 2015, which makes participation and management of Groups more fluid. At the time this paper was being written (early 2016), an Android version was reported as forthcoming.

- Increased privacy All groups are now private. Conversations are visible only to group members, and membership is on an invitation-only basis. “Standard” groups allow any member to invite new members; whereas, in “Unlisted” groups, which are not searchable, only group administrators can issue invitations to join.
- A streamlined interface The simpler navigation system is aimed at making it less cumbersome to find, join, and initiate groups.
- A new way to find groups LinkedIn revised the method used to suggest new groups to members based on a self-selecting matching process. According to LinkedIn, “The simple action of accepting or dismissing … suggestions [that it makes] leads to smarter, more tailored recommendations for you (LinkedIn, 2016d).”

The LinkedIn Groups Redesign: Casual Observations

When one of the authors of this paper reviewed several LinkedIn Groups to which he belonged in late 2015, it did seem that group pages contained a lower amount of self-promotional, “spammy” content. This being said, much content remained “promotional” due to the fact that it directed members to third-party sources, including feature articles and blog posts. When viewed from this perspective, LinkedIn’s revamped Groups still appear to offer not much additional value than topically-centric versions of the main LinkedIn news feed.

Still, the simple fact that Groups are now private should help prevent some of the objectionable activities mentioned earlier. This, in turn, should open the way to more meaningful and relevant dialogue among group members. Furthermore, the introduction of iOS and Android versions of LinkedIn has the potential to increase group participation. Ultimately, achieving higher quality discussions may still be a function of how well group owners, managers, and moderators can cultivate relevant conversations and block spammers from posting content that has no relevance, a topic that will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

INCORPORATING LINKEDIN GROUPS INTO THE B2B MARKETING MIX

As mentioned in the introduction, LinkedIn Groups are more than a venue where professionals with similar interests can meet and have industry-related discussions. If they are used properly, Groups also can be employed as a means to develop business; that is, they can be a part of the B2B marketing mix. The next several paragraphs discuss five methods for using LinkedIn Groups to connect with others in an industry and develop a highly-focused list of qualified prospects, which in turn can be used to generate leads and ultimately sales.

Join Relevant Groups

Obviously, the web marketer must join one or more LinkedIn Group if Groups are to be used to develop business. It is vital, however, that those Groups be “relevant;” that is, they must fit the marketer’s industry, areas of interest, and target market(s). And while LinkedIn permits an individual to become a member of as many as 100 Groups at one time, it is quite important that the marketer only join those in which he/she can actively participate.

There are several methods one can use to locate relevant LinkedIn Standard Groups (see Appendix A):

- Search LinkedIn's Search feature includes an option to search for Groups. To use it, one simply clicks on an icon adjacent to the search field and chooses "Groups." Then, as with any search tool, one enters the keywords best suited to his/her industry, location, possible job titles of prospects, and/or the target market. It also is possible to LinkedIn's boolean search feature to produce results that are even more closely associated with the groups one wishes to join. For example, the search term "VP OR (director AND division)" would generate results including either VP or the words director and division (as in Director of the Marketing Division). The Search feature only locates Standard Groups.
- Discover When the marketer clicks on the "Discover" link, which can be found in the Groups area, based on what it has "learned" about a member, LinkedIn suggests relevant Standard Groups for that member to join.
- Connections Carefully looking through one's LinkedIn Connections (i.e., contacts) can be another fruitful method of locating relevant Groups to join. To do this, the member simply selects one of his/her connections, goes to that connection's profile page where there will be a list of Standard Groups in which the connection is a member. Perhaps one or more of these groups will be relevant to the marketer.
- Directory Yet another path to discovering relevant Groups is through the use of LinkedIn's alphabetized Group directory. Browsing through the list is both cumbersome and time consuming, but it includes every Standard Group in LinkedIn's database, one or more of which might be relevant to the searcher's interests.

Notice that each of the above methods for locating relevant Groups only returns results that include LinkedIn Standard Groups. One joins a Standard Group either by clicking a "Join" button on the Group's Discussions or another page, or by responding positively to invitation to join from a Group member or manager. Group administrators reserve the right to review requests to join, and they also can require the potential member to submit additional information to assure that he/she meets the Group's criteria for membership (LinkedIn, 2016f). LinkedIn members only can join an Unlisted Group when they are invited to join by either the Group owner or Group manager, or they can make a request to join if they have been sent the group's URL (perhaps by one of the Unlisted Group's members or by its owner or manager).

Become an Active Participant

There are two main ways in which the online marketer can participate in a LinkedIn Group. First, one can join discussions, and second, one can post content that is relevant to members of the Group. Participating in discussions gives the marketer visibility to other Group members.

Simply stated, the marketer's strategy with respect to joining discussions should be to build social capital; thus, one should attempt to make comments that add as much value as possible, while not being overtly self-promotional. The marketer can build credibility and acquire a reputation as a thought leader if he/she focuses on posting content that is either original or curated from third-party information. ("... content curation is the act of sorting through large amounts of content on the web and presenting the best posts in a meaningful and organized way (Cisnero, 2014).") Posting valuable content not only can promote meaningful discussions, but it also can bring to the marketer's attention Group members with whom he/she may want to connect and cultivate relationships that could result in business development.

Use Groups as a Means to Connect

Regarding the topic of making connections, the potential reward of doing so through a LinkedIn Group is that the Group functions as a “filter.” This gives the marketer the ability to pre-qualify prospects prior to requesting a connection with another group member. To accomplish this, the marketer must click the LinkedIn “My Groups” link, and then, using the “Filter” option, enter strategically-chosen keywords to locate relevant groups. After a group is chosen from the filter results, the marketer can scan through the list of its members to identify likely individuals with whom to connect. Prior to requesting a connection, one can view the profile pages of the likely candidates to further narrow down the choices. Of course, this process can be time-consuming, but it can yield valuable prospects.

An alternative method for contacting members of the Group prior to establishing a connection is to privately reply to a message that individual has posted to a discussion. LinkedIn controls how frequently one can do this, however, by limiting the maximum number of one-to-one Group messages a member can send each month to fifteen. This limit applies to all groups to which the marketer is a member, rather than each individual group. In other words, if one belongs to four groups, the number of one-to-one Group messages is limited to a total of fifteen, rather than sixty (i.e., 4 x 15).

When the marketer is ready to request a connection, that request should be personalized. This means that the marketer needs to invest some time reviewing the prospect’s profile and locating something personal to address in the message. Finally, the name of the Group member to whom the request is being directed should always be included in the request’s greeting.

Launch a Group

Regardless of whether the marketer can locate a group that meets his/her needs for prospecting, it frequently can be wise to start a Group, since Group ownership carries with it some potentially valuable privileges, including control over membership, the direction taken by discussions, group type, settings, and rules for participation. When taken together, these privileges help position the marketer as an influencer; thus, when the marketer publishes his/her own content, it will be viewed as a means to stimulate discussion rather than being promotional in nature.

To create and launch a group, one simply does the following (see https://help.linkedin.com/app/answers/detail/a_id/6/~creating-a-group for a more detail discussion of this topic):

- Click “Groups,” located under the LinkedIn “Interests” tab;
- Click the “Create a Group” button;
- Add a logo identifying the group;
- Name the group (using appropriate keywords is best);
- Write a description (in both the summary and long-form options);
- Include a link to the marketer’s website;
- Select the visibility (standard; or unlisted);
- Choose language and location;
- Edit the “Welcome” email message; and
- Compose the Group rules.

How to effectively manage LinkedIn Groups is the topic of the final section of this paper.

Driving Traffic and Backlinks with Groups

One method of generating traffic to one's website or blog is to contribute original content (discussed in more detail later in this paper) that appeals to Group members. If that website or blog has been optimized for conversion (a topic that is beyond the scope of this paper, see (Chawla, 2016) for an introduction), the marketer can convert this traffic into leads and/or sales. Furthermore, contributing interesting, valuable content can motivate other Group members to include links to the marketer's website or blog from their web properties, which produce backlinks that can help improve the marketer's website's ranking in search engine results.

EFFECTIVE LINKEDIN GROUP MANAGEMENT

As can be seen above, initiating a LinkedIn Group is a relatively simple process; however, effectively managing a group requires time, skill, and some effort. Cultivating discussions that have value to the participants, while blocking spam as well as veiled promotional "contributions," requires manual monitoring (despite the 2015 changes made by LinkedIn). The paragraphs that follow, which are based on one of the author's experiences moderating multiple LinkedIn Groups, discuss six principles for effective LinkedIn Group management.

Satisfactorily plan before "going live"

As mentioned above, it just takes a small number of steps, which require just a few minutes time, to establish a LinkedIn Group; however, it is vital to do some well-thought-out planning prior to initiating those four steps. For example, decisions need to be made about each of the following:

- What is the Group's purpose?
- What will be the Group's name?
- Who do you want to join the Group; that is, who should be sent invitations?
- What human capital resources will need to be devoted to the Group's management?
- What will be the ethical standards for the behavior of Group members; that is, how will such things as "spammy" self-serving posts be treated, will expletives be permitted, etc.?

Above all, there must be a unifying factor that draws members together and makes them be "one with the group." If the marketer's vision is to develop an online community that is dynamic and increasing in membership, it is vital that the Group's creator communicate an explicit, easily understood goal with which members can readily identify, "congregate" around, and develop a substantial, healthy degree of ownership.

Don't focus on the technology, focus on the people

Perhaps the most damaging misstep a group manager can make is to focus on technological issues instead of building relationships between and among members. Connie Bensen, a respected consultant who specializes in building online community, stresses the previous fact in the following statement:

“More important than the technology is the people factor. While it’s true that technology platforms are getting richer in terms of features, even something as simple as forums can be used effectively. The issue is not the technology, but the people who make up the community (Bensen, 2016).”

The manager must have experience with LinkedIn Groups

To be effective, a LinkedIn Group must be overseen by an experienced group manager. The person who assumes, or is given, this role must be a topic-savvy, well-informed individual who is willing and able to devote the time, the focus, and the “caring” that is required to foster the growth and health of the community. This individual must not be an authoritarian in style, but someone who can facilitate Group conversations, encourage meaningful Group participation by members, and create an atmosphere that promotes Group vitality.

The group manager needs to create content

Research has demonstrated that the great majority of individuals who become members of online communities neither create content nor comment on content created by others (Hargittai, 2008). Since this is the case, the effective Group manager will need to assure that there is a substantial amount of quality content for Group members to consume. This especially is the case when the Group is first launched. Not only is this yet another reason why that manager must be must be a topic-savvy and well-informed, but it also can be a key ingredient in using a LinkedIn Group as part of the B2B marketing mix (discussed later) .

Foster member engagement

The effective Group manager must foster engagement by the membership. When one provides the initial leadership, that individual will usually see a core cohort of more active members coalesce. Ordinarily, it will be this cohort that originally generates the greater part of the community-contributed content. Cultivation and maintenance of the engagement level in this cohort can result in a dynamic, meaningful, and growing Group as time passes.

Quickly cancel spammers’ memberships

If one’s Group becomes plagued by “spam,” the memberships of the offenders should be quickly canceled. A Group whose content is deluged with “spammy” posts will be viewed as irrelevant to the desired membership. As mentioned earlier, LinkedIn’s recent change making all Groups private, should help eliminate, or at least greatly reduce “spam.” The latter fact notwithstanding, however, an effective Group manager must keep a close lookout for violators.

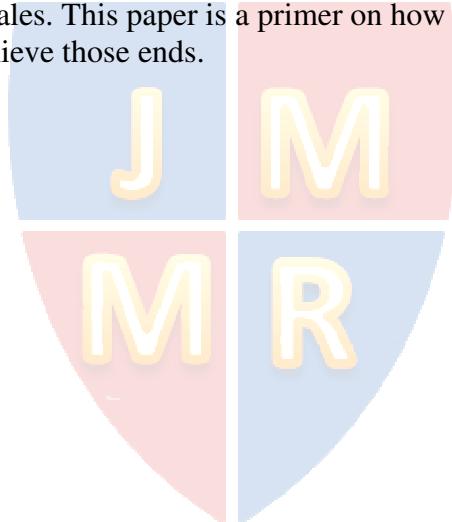
LinkedIn’s tips for effective group management

In addition to the six principles discussed above, LinkedIn publishes suggests the following list of best practices for effective group management:

- Check once or twice a week for requests to join, submissions to approve, and flagged posts to moderate. If possible, check daily to encourage group growth
- Listen to group members' feedback
- Keep discussions professional and polite
- Report spam and review flagged content in the management console moderation queue
- Use "Manager's Choice" to highlight meaningful conversations and information
- Celebrate milestones; for example, send an announcement when the group reaches a certain number of members (LinkedIn, 2015).

CONCLUSION

As many in business know, LinkedIn is a perfect setting in which to connect with others in one's industry and to participate in meaningful online conversations. As a value proposition, however, social media marketing will fail if those conversations do not motivate action on the part of prospects. When done correctly, one's participation in LinkedIn Groups can assist in the generation of both leads and sales. This paper is a primer on how the online marketer can begin to use LinkedIn Groups to achieve those ends.



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Appendix A
A Brief Lexicon of LinkedIn Terminology
Compiled from the LinkedIn "Help" Website (LinkedIn, 2016e)

1st Degree Connection - On LinkedIn, the basic type of connection is a contact you know personally and who you trust on a professional level. Once you have "connected" to them on LinkedIn, you are considered a 1st-degree connection.

Connection – a LinkedIn contact. May be 1st Degree or more distantly connected.

Group manager - Has the same access to the group as the owner except they cannot close or transfer ownership of the group.

Group moderator - Limited to monitoring conversations and comments and managing submission and moderation queues. They can also feature a conversation.

Group owner - Has control over membership, conversations, group type, settings, rules and more. They can also transfer ownership of a group to another group manager.

Standard Groups - Groups which show up in search results on LinkedIn and other search engines (such as Google). Only group members can view or post conversations. Group members can invite their 1st degree connections to join. Conversations and comments are visible to group members only. The group owner has the option to make the group unlisted only when the group is created. Group members can approve requests to join from their 1st degree connections.

Unlisted Groups - The group is not searchable by any search engine (such as Google or LinkedIn Search), but a group's profile page can be viewed by anyone with the group URL. Members of a group cannot display the group on their profile to members who do not belong to that group. Only group members can view conversations in a group. Members can join an Unlisted Group by invitation from the group owner or manager, or by requesting to join after the group URL is sent to them.