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The etiquette of social networking

Expert advice on online manners.

by *Dan Tynan, Macworld.com*   Sep 30, 2008 10:15 pm   0 Comments   2

Social networks like Facebook and MySpace have turned many social norms inside out. Your online friends may not be friends offline—and you may not be exactly whom you claim to be, either. How to approach strangers online, handle unwelcome solicitations, or make real friends out of virtual ones is stuff your parents probably never taught you. Here's how etiquette experts would politely navigate the worlds of Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

Q: I've got a strict policy about "friending": I invite only people I know well. And sometimes people they know. And occasionally complete strangers whose profiles sound cool. Is there anything wrong with that?

A: Overaggressive friending is the most common social-networking faux pas. After all, these networks were made to facilitate new connections.

Social media consultant Ariel Waldman says that it's usually fine to friend people you don't know just to make their acquaintance. "Otherwise you wouldn't really be networking," she says. But it depends on the service. Friending someone you don't know on Dodgeball (a location-based service that lets you see other users who are physically nearby) is creepier than doing so on Twitter, which doesn't give away users' real-life locations.

In fact, Facebook and LinkedIn automatically suggest people you might know, based on whoever's already in your network. In general, you should already have some kind of link to the person you want to meet—even if he or she is merely a friend of a friend—and a valid reason for making the connection.

Q: I'm scrupulously honest in most things, but my online profile—well, let's just say it's a best-case scenario. Am I required to be totally honest when describing myself?

A: It depends on what you mean by totally. A little embellishment may be OK, but stretch the truth too far, warns Samantha Von Sperling, director of Polished Social Image Consultants, and you'll put your reputation at risk. The solution is to be honest—don't edit your picture so you look like Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie—but selective about the information you share. For example, Facebook requires that you supply your birthday at signup. But you can hide it: in the Edit My Profile page's Basic tab, select Don't Show My Birthday In My Profile from the drop-down menu.

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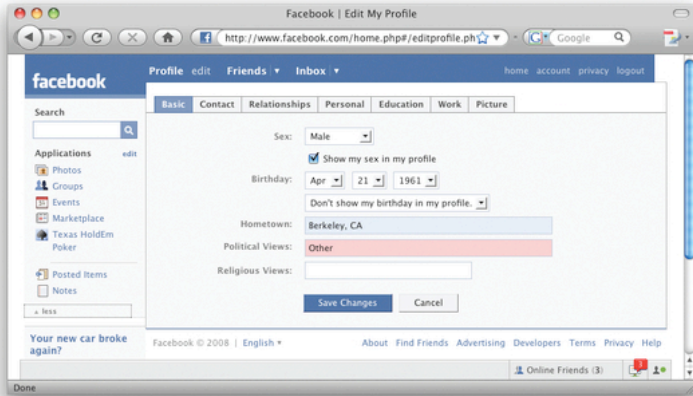
Don't want Facebook friends to know how old you really are? You can opt to hide your birthday.

"Saying I'm in my 30s when I'm 37 is fine," Von Sperling says. "But it's not OK to say I'm in my 20s. If I start lying about how old I am, how much money I make, or how much I weigh, sooner or later someone will find out and I will look like an idiot."

Q: I'm getting friend requests from people I moved 3,000 miles to get away from. How do I tactfully decline their invitations?

A: The first rule of social networks is you're never required to say yes.

"You can say 'No thank you' or simply not respond," notes Claudia Caporal, an urban etiquette and lifestyle consultant in Miami. "Behavior that might be considered rude in person isn't necessarily rude online."

Of course, if you run into that person on the street or at your college reunion, you may have some explaining to do. "If they ask you whether you got their invitation, tell them that you don't really spend that much time on Facebook anymore," she says. "You can find a compromise answer that doesn't hurt their feelings."

A sneakier way to avoid unwelcome invitations is to accept the offer of friendship, and then quietly unfriend that person a few days later, says Kim Gregson, an assistant professor of communications at Ithaca College. On Facebook, go to your Friends list and click on the little x to the right of a name. No notification will be sent; you'll simply disappear from that person's network. If he or she notices and asks about it, plead ignorance. "If someone is following their list of friends that closely, you probably don't want to be their friend anyway," Gregson says.

Q: I've been using Facebook since college, so I have lots of friends and have posted lots of personal photos. Now I've got a job, and my office colleagues want to join my network. How do I keep my boss from seeing those old pictures of me dancing on a bar in a miniskirt and cowboy boots?
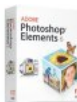
A: One way to handle the work-friend conundrum is to use a professionally oriented network such as LinkedIn for your work colleagues and a more casual one such as Facebook for everyone else.

If your networks are mixed—if you have social contacts on LinkedIn or business colleagues on Facebook—and want to move someone from one network to the other, you can. Programs such as Professional Profile let you transfer personal contacts from LinkedIn to Facebook. Although LinkedIn doesn't have similar tools, you can still add friends to your business network, either by importing their names from an online e-mail service,

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such as Gmail (▦) or Yahoo Mail (▦), or by exporting them as a group from OS X's Address Book and then uploading the resulting VCF file to LinkedIn. You can then delete them from Facebook.
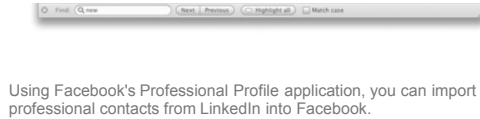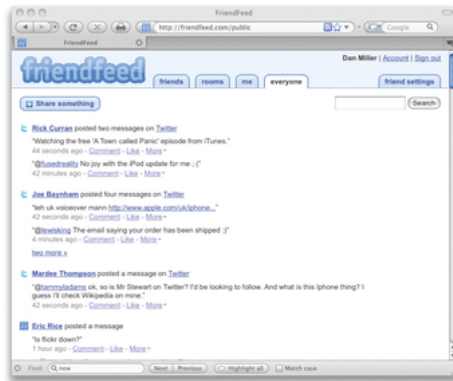

Using Facebook's Professional Profile application, you can import professional contacts from LinkedIn into Facebook.

The other option is to segregate friends within the same service. Start by selecting the Privacy link in the upper right corner of your Facebook home page, and then selecting Profile. In the Basic tab, select Edit Photo Albums Privacy Settings. Select a photo album, and, under Who Can See This?, select Customize. You can then decide who can and can't see your photos.

Q: I've got accounts on Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Friendster, Flickr, and Twitter, and I've recently started Plurking and Powncing. I only sleep three hours a night, yet my virtual buddies think I'm being rude because I'm not keeping up with them hourly. Help!

A: While services like Friendfeed and OneSwirl can help you keep track of multiple social networks in one place, maybe you should instead step away from the keyboard.

The problem with social networks is that they can encourage you to shortchange people outside your virtual life, says Rabbi Shmuley Boteach (www.shmuley.com), author of *The Broken American Male* and host of the TLC series Shalom in the Home. "Should you be spending hours each day corresponding with some person you've never met?" asks Boteach (whose Facebook profile boasts more than 1,700 friends). "Maybe

Using a service like Friendfeed, you can combine all your social networks in one interface.

you should be cultivating more important relationships. With all this time you spend on social networks, who are you neglecting as a result?"

When not indiscriminately poking people on Facebook, Dan Tynan tends his blog, Tynan on Technology.

Editor's Note: For another take on the whole social-networking/etiquette thing, see Scholle Sawyer McFarland's The social graces of social networking.

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