

Simple truths about online networking



Sometimes meeting in person can be difficult due to MS; online networking offers a great way to connect.

by Darren Flomberg

Networking is a time-honored way to make contacts and build relationships important to a career. But for many people with multiple sclerosis, fatigue, cognitive or speech issues and mobility challenges can make attending professional conferences, classes or even casual get-togethers difficult. Thanks to [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#) and other online resources, you can still network successfully. As a rehabilitation counselor who works with others with the disease, and as a person with MS, I have learned some simple truths about online networking.

Know your value

MS can rock your confidence and self-esteem, but everyone has value. Think about your accomplishments and what you are passionate about. Then, make a list of everything you've done, whether at work or through independent activities, such as volunteering at a school or helping someone with a project. Refer to this list when developing online profiles.

Develop your online presence

Your online presence is the impression you leave with people after you interact with them through email and social media sites. Get a simple email address, such as **firstnamelastinitial@host-company.com**. This will give you credibility from the start. Avoid using "fun" names; "partyperson2013" won't engender much respect.

Then, start slowly and build up. Relationships take time in the physical world, and they also take time online. Creating a page on facebook.com is a great way to get the hang of virtual

networking. Reconnecting with old friends and co-workers is a step toward getting introduced and recommended to potential employers, who often prefer to hire people they or their employees know, as long as the person is truly qualified.

Many organizations also have their own Facebook pages where you can learn more about them. While random friending is not recommended, you can learn more about employers by following or “liking” them. Networking is as much about research and gathering intelligence as it is talking to people.

While developing your Facebook page: Do “like” events or organizations that are related to your profession. Do post links that support the impression you’re trying to create. Don’t post photos, links or “likes” that potential employers might find controversial or unprofessional. Do monitor privacy settings and “tags” from friends. And, very importantly, do watch your language!

The next step

Graduate to LinkedIn.com once you have established an online presence. LinkedIn is a site geared directly to professionals for the purpose of networking. For that reason, it’s better to commit a faux pas on Facebook than on LinkedIn, where potential employers expect you to be familiar with online etiquette. While you might discuss business on Facebook, you would not discuss what you did over the weekend on LinkedIn.

Join one or two groups related to your profession to see how they work. (Many groups relate to specific job functions, industries and companies.) Spend some time reviewing past posts and conversations before you post to a group you’ve joined. If you’re not sure what to post, forward interesting articles related to your professional interests.

Your [LinkedIn](#) profile should clearly demonstrate your value to networking contacts and showcase your accomplishments. In part, your value to a future employer relates directly to how you helped past employers. Did you help employers make money, save money, get new customers or preserve existing ones? Highlight these achievements in bullet points under each position. And have someone you trust look at your profile before posting it.

More online options

[Pinterest.com](#) is an online collection of images posted by members. While not as popular as Facebook or LinkedIn, it’s still a good way to connect with others, and many employers also use it as a marketing tool. Users can sometimes gain valuable information about organizations, which then can be leveraged for networking purposes.

More Info

Read “[4 networking apps to try](#)” to find out about four useful tools for online networking using an Apple or Android smartphone.

Professional association websites can also be excellent resources, with up-to-date information about their industry or profession, training opportunities and listservs (email discussion groups where members can start or join conversations or “threads”). An excellent resource is [Weddle’s Directory of Associations](#) which also links to many associations for people with disabilities. [MSconnection.org](#) offers people with MS a place to connect directly with each other and discuss issues, including employment.

There, you can also get expert advice from the Society’s employment specialists.

Continuing the connections

You’ve established your profiles on the major social networking sites, joined listservs related to your profession and initiated connections with others in your field. What comes next? Begin talking about what you can offer. If you have cognitive issues, develop a script (no longer than 15-30 seconds) and practice it. It can include such information as:

- how long you have been in a specific industry;
- what makes you good at your work;
- what makes you passionate about your work; and
- what you can do to help an employer.

Productive networking can happen at any time if you are ready. That said, know when you have the most energy and the best outlook. If you have more energy in the morning, focus on networking then.

Above all, networking should be fun. Your enthusiasm for whatever you do—and who you are—will shine through.

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Network and connect with others with MS at [MSconnection.org](#).