

Waiting for the right professional network

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I recently asked an investor for some SEO advice (because he had run B2C companies). He came on a call to give his opinions on what we had done till then with SEO. I thanked him on LinkedIn. A few hours later, another SEO consultant offered his input. Curiously, he had a recommendation on his profile, from this investor.

Eventually he got our business. He did not sell anything to us. It was more of an expertise giver-

getter conversation. We were at par. This investor earned my goodwill and the consultant's. I actively contribute to his deal flow in a small way. He isn't asking me to, but I am prospecting for him.

Do you see what happened? The SEO consultant did not engineer his way into a conversation



insight and reached out at the right time.

Today there is enough data available to bring people of similar or adjacent profiles closer, and inform them about signals and contexts where they could either help, pay it forward or seek help. Over a period of time, a community (a micro-market network) will form that will prospect for each other — be it for a job or a deal or funding.

Ergo, we can replace awkward sales overtures with touch points precisely planned by a deep understanding of one's extended network.

We need sophisticated tools that don't just help us fake our way to conversations using data points, but truly connect us with our customers and hiring managers through people, ideas and causes that we have in common.

Sounds like LinkedIn, right? Wrong.

Why didn't professional networks replace cold with warm?

They are about resumes, not motivations

Today's professional networks have a "resume graph" or (to be flattering) a "prospect graph," not a "[people's economic] motivation graph" (the graph that plots their give/get instincts over time and in different contexts).

In the absence of awareness of motivations and interests, people simply connect to ask for favors or sell in your face. That's why you don't accept connection invites anymore!

They are about connections, not relationships

In a network where there is no friction to connect, the connections themselves become superficial. We are connected because we can, not because we share common principles, background or traits.

Un-nurtured connections turn cold, or at least become useless as connectors between you and your ultimate prospect. The result is that you'd resort to smarmy sales tactics for an intro through a common connection.

They treat you as the product even though you're ready to open your wallet

Highly networked professionals (entrepreneurs) still don't have a way to keep track of their



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LinkedIn, WhatsApp, email and offline conversations, but no packaged insights that prod us to reach out to people who are important for us.

A well-designed professional network will have to be a true market-network of professionals.

Example: LinkedIn and Facebook both know I am connected to a certain CEO of a SaaS company. He is organizing a SaaS conference in 2017, but neither network thinks it's important to notify me about it and ask me to ping this

CEO/conference organizer to ask if he needs any help. A real opportunity to help and thereby strengthen the relationship is lost.

The circle that Google+ created or the groups that LinkedIn or Facebook designed did/continue to do an underwhelming job of surfacing contexts for professional networking with my first two degrees of professional acquaintances. Without context, there is no reason to be in touch. Lost in touch, we resort to cold methods of reaching out at the time of need. The network is vast, but its utility is minimal, because it isn't designed to take advantage of context.

They are not engineering serendipitous conversations

Professionals react to "help requests" or ask for "tips, information or help" in an ad hoc manner across networks. Often, they don't ask or give, just out of inertia. For the asker, this creates friction, and they don't ask in the network the next time around. The networks don't do a good job of parsing the person's connections to suggest which subset should they target their broadcast to for a given context.

The nudge to ask and the nudge to give has to be explicitly designed till the habit forms.

Connections and commerce – the force multiplier

The absence of a truly valuable professional network — one where the participants (users like you and I) gain more than the customers (recruiters and sales reps) points to the fact that a simple professional network isn't a pragmatic design when we think about reinventing outreach.

A professional network is only as valuable as the ease of access I have, as a user, to the real identities and network profiles of my connections. I need to know who I am connected with,



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paid through social currency. Some pre-pay (karma or pay it forward), others post-pay (“I owe you one” as we practice in the world of selling).

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Networks that ignore the “intent” of connections and subvert the natural urge of commerce become materially less important networks ([to quote the words of Wall Street about LinkedIn](#)) for the purpose of outreach and relationship building.

Come to think of it, a well-designed professional network will have to be a true market-network of professionals, where they engage with each other meaningfully through a clear understanding of each other's profile and transact primarily to give or take help in professional contexts.

Unlike a general professional network, a professional market-network will organize itself around interests and backgrounds (micro-networks, if you would) of the users, and enable them to transact with each other more than merely being used as sources of data — a gross under-utilization of the value of the network for all the participants.

With such a network, outreach becomes focused and curated — making it a better experience for everyone involved.

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