

Posted on Mon, Feb. 08, 2010

Consider Ning to broaden social networking strategy

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Your business Facebooks. It Tweets. But does it Ning? There are about 300,000 active groups on Ning -- many of them brands and interest groups -- and about 40 million users actively participating in them. If your business has a social media strategy (and there had better be a strategy) you might want to consider setting up a Ning network.

It's a place where you can take any topic and make a social network community for it in less than 10 minutes. I spoke with Ning's chief operating officer, Jason Rosenthal, who says every month there is a 14 percent increase of active Ning networks. There are about 2.1 million networks in total, but not all are active. That's about 40,000 new and active networks created a month.

Why take the time to create a whole new network on Ning when you can just make a Facebook Fan page? Tracey Udas, a social media strategist at Excelerated Performance, said Ning gives her business clients more value because you can track more data about members.

When a member wants to join a community, the community administrator can set it up so they answer questions about themselves. If it's about a car company, they ask what car they drive, what they want to get out of the community -- even get their e-mail to send newsletters. And her team uses the free Google Analytics tool to measure site traffic.

Her clients are also on Facebook, and she said they realize Ning isn't going to be a Facebook replacement -- nor will it ever be as huge. But if you're a woman-owned business selling auto parts, like AutoTex Pink, the network becomes a place for women to talk cars -- and of course talk about its products.

"They're not going in expecting 20,000 members to sign up," she said. "They're expecting to drive traffic to their corporate site. It shows them as an expert in the industry, so to speak."

Another perk: Being able to personalize the page design and make it look like a stand-alone site. A Facebook Fan page is displayed within Facebook. But a Ning page can have its own URL, like the Ning networks MyWorkButterfly.com or MyAutoTexPink.com, and you don't need to be a member to see it.

Ning just launched a way to integrate with Twitter. If there's an update on Ning, it can automatically alert Twitter followers.

But with Ning's updates came a new navigation system -- which took away the ability to search for topics. It simply suggests networks. Julia Gorzka, a social media consultant who created the Ning network BrandTampa.com, isn't too pleased with the change and hopes it won't stifle the growth of her 1,400-members site, which promotes happenings in the Tampa area.

She's about to create a [BrandTampa](http://BrandTampa.com) Facebook Fan page to hit more people, but predicts Ning will continue to have more value.

"If you're on Facebook and Twitter, they're really noisy these days," Gorzka said. "There's a lot of what I call absentee activism. But on this thing, you have people who are truly interested."

Poked is a column about netiquette, social media and the business world. E-mail us if you have a vexing question or need advice.