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Networking on the 'Net

BY TYLER WHITAKER

Who you know' is often times more important than 'what you know.' In business, expanding your social network has traditionally meant exchanging business cards, playing golf and attending the local chamber of commerce meetings. While not as fun as hitting golf balls, the Internet is making it even easier to expand your social network.

When it comes to networking, you have three options: love it, hate it or love to hate it. I must admit, at times, I've fit into each of those categories. Even so, I know your personal network is one of the greatest assets you can develop. Networks, however, are only as good as your ability to add value and create opportunities. Being able to keep track of contact information and keep in touch with those you've met can be a fulltime job. That's where a new breed of social networking Web sites can help.

► **LinkedIn.com.** LinkedIn.com can keep track of your business and personal contacts and you don't need to type all of them in. LinkedIn has the ability to upload your contacts from Microsoft Outlook. It also has features to stay in touch with people, find long-lost co-workers and search your contacts and their associates. But the one of the best features is your ability request introductions to people several relationships away.

With even a modest number of contacts in the system, you can connect with thousands of other professionals both inside and outside of your industry.

► **Jott.com.** Jott.com is one of the coolest Web sites I've seen in while. Jott is a Web site, an email reminder service, a private stenographer and a group-messaging tool all in one. Jott allows you to call an 800 number and leave a message for yourself or others using a simple and easy voice interface. That message is then translated into text and emailed back to you or sent to a list of your contacts. It's perfect for leaving yourself a reminder message or informing your office staff of a change in the weekly staff meeting. Staying in contact has never been so easy.

► **MeetingWizard.com.** In networking, nothing is better than face-to-face. Being able to go to lunch or visit someone's office can make or break a business deal. But the biggest problem is that the most valuable meetings are often with people that have the busiest schedules. Finding a time that works for everyone is time consuming and a major barrier to success. That's where MeetingWizard.com is such a great tool. You suggest a topic, a couple of dates and times, and a list of attendees, and it does all of the hard work automatically. It contacts your attendees and figures out a time when everyone can meet. This one is a real time saver. Anything that makes it easier to set up meetings is a good thing in my book.

Networking may not be your strong suit, but with these tools you'll be a pro in no time. Each of these solutions comes with a free price tag, so put that Rolodex away and let the technology do the hard work.

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