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Social Networking: Connecting the Dots

By Rachel Wimberly -- *Tradeshows Week, 3/23/2009*

Social networking tools have evolved to such a point that buyers and sellers not only are able to connect before, during and after a show – even “spotting” each other on a showfloor with handheld devices – but also everyone has the opportunity to use the technology to network.

One of the first companies to figure out that social networking and face-to-face marketing were a perfect fit was BDMetrics, which entered the market in 2004 at the Natl. Assn. of Broadcasters' **The NAB Show**.

“We wanted to build something that would help businesses and professionals connect on the showfloor,” said Don Mahoney, BDMetrics' chief product officer. “It was the ‘Field of Dreams’ strategy. If you build it, they will come. With 20,000 people under the same roof for four days, why wouldn't they want to hook up with each other?”

While the technology made sense, Mahoney added, “(People) weren't quite ready for it.”

The BDMetrics team went to work with focus groups and taught them how to search the online software for products they were looking for and set meetings with potential buyers and sellers.

“Without context they didn't know what to do with it,” he said.

Now the company services up to 75 shows annually and decided it needed to expand the social networking tool even further by integrating other social media platforms, such as LinkedIn and MySpace, to name a few, Mahoney added.

It hasn't been rolled out quite yet, but he said the idea is to use something like LinkedIn, for example, that would allow people to send messages out to their own networks and find out who might be attending the same show.

“It's like, if you have a workout partner in the morning, you are more apt to go,” Mahoney said. For now, he added, BDMetrics is working with an advisory group of show managers to hone the offering, and the company hopes to have it ready to go by some of the spring shows.

Another company that caught on to the fact that a room full of people all in one place to do business might want to connect beforehand is IntroNetworks, which services approximately 40 events annually.

“The primary reason that people go to a tradeshow is buying and selling,” said IntroNetworks' CEO Mark Sylvester. “The goal (of the company) is to connect as many people as possible.”

Event attendees also are looking for new clients, partners and deals so, according to Sylvester, the question becomes – how does someone find who those people are?

The company's social networking platform consists of online software that allows attendees to create profiles, and then people who have similar profiles or who are looking for similar things are matched.

“Networking is a key reason people will pay to go to (an event),” Sylvester said, “so the online version of that becomes very important to them.” He added one of the several benefits of IntroNetworks' matching system is the amount of time that can be saved. “People are very busy,” Sylvester said. “They need to think of the ROI of the event and ask, ‘What's the cost per business card?’”

Even though the company has found success with its existing tool, he added they are constantly looking for ways to add even more value, such as by integrating virtual learning services; creating a Google Maps section that will show where everyone is from; and upgrading the original platform to Flex – Adobe's Developmental Platform.

“Now we can innovate better and much faster,” Sylvester said of Flex.

In addition, IntroNetworks talked to its customers, asked them what else they wanted the company to do and learned they were looking for subgroups within the program to communicate even more efficiently with each other.

“Now, more than ever, you have to clearly articulate the value that you have,” Sylvester said.

Banz Ledin, CEO of Spotme, figured out that one of the best ways for people to find each other on a showfloor is to create a handheld device that literally lets someone know when another person is nearby that they want to connect with.

“The device will look out for them and point them out,” Ledin said. That's not all it does. The device has other tools that come in handy at an event: an agenda, a map of the venue, a complete list of all the attendees and a full keyboard to send messages.

The tool is used at hundreds of events annually, Ledin said. “Right now, there's nothing like it,” he added. The social networking tool originally was launched in Switzerland in 2001, and the company brought it to the United States last year. “We've had a very good response in the U.S. market,” Ledin said. “The people really appreciate the service.”

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