



Grow your social circle — online!

Be in the know: Get the lowdown on social networking

By Maureen Littlejohn

In the past, people swapped stories at the water cooler. Fast track to the present day and you'll find the hottest places to boast about your baby or Caribbean cruise are social networking web sites.

Why are people around the world so eager to jump onto this new mode of communication? "The access tools provided at the sites make it really easy to do for anyone, from teens to grandmothers," says Debbie Weil, a blogging consultant in Washington, D.C., and author of *The Corporate Blogging Book* (Portfolio, 2006). "Plus, these sites are extremely convenient to use since you can check out sites or make an entry 24/7."

Online networking hubs are an instant and captivating way for others to get to know the latest about your life through your writing, photos and videos. But networking hubs don't only provide up-to-date information. They can also provide entertainment.

"My husband, who is a doctor, was a complete computer-phobe, but now he likes to go in and look at funny videos," says Weil. There are thousands of sites dedicated to this kind of virtual interaction, but the best known are Windows Live Spaces, MySpace and YouTube.

Getting started

If you're thinking about jumping on board but don't know where to begin, the first thing to do is fine tune your goals. There is a networking site for everyone from recipe collectors to bulldog owners. Wikipedia has a list of social networking sites with a description of each one's specialty.

It's also easy to search a general social networking site for like-minded people. For instance, on the Windows Live Spaces home page under Interests, click on an activity such as "swimming," or enter a word such as "puzzles" into the search box to find people who have that interest listed in their profiles.

"Blogging and sharing images tend to be the top priorities. We focus on those who want to keep in touch with real friends and family," explains Randy Micucci, product manager for Windows Live Spaces, one of Canada's most popular social networking destinations.

While Spaces is popular with teens (about a quarter of users are under 17), Micucci says Windows Live Spaces is for people "who want to update others on their day-to-day living."

Here comes baby

Toronto mom Marie-Claude Cantin built her space while on maternity leave. "It was really easy to set up. When you go to the Windows Live Spaces site, it walks you through everything from inputting your address to adding photos," she explains.

Cantin posts pictures of her son William so her family in Quebec can see how he's growing.

“You don’t have to spend a lot of time sending photos by e-mail. You just do it once. It’s low maintenance,” she says.

Cantin is also a spokesperson for Reallivemoms.ca, a site where moms can get parenting advice and connect. “Talking with other mothers is often the best way to get information,” she says. “I’ll post a question and two minutes later I get an answer. It’s a very direct way to connect with a lot of people.”

Whether you’re interested in raising newborn children, losing weight or learning why your roses aren’t flourishing, you’re sure to find a like-minded group out there. “You can discuss problems and issues, and you realize you are not the only one. It’s very comforting,” says Weil. “You’re tapping into the knowledge of a crowd.”

For parents with older kids, the online sharing sometimes starts in the real world. Kerry Marshall is learning about social networking from her daughter Sidney. “I’m a little computer illiterate, so I depend on Sidney to teach me,” she says.

As for Sidney, her favorite activity is uploading photos. She recently used her Live Spaces site to post shots of herself in a local production of *Gypsy*. Sidney also enjoys writing a blog. “It’s a really great way to tell my friends what I’m doing,” she says.

Safety is a big selling point for Sidney’s mother who notes the permission-based privacy feature “only lets in the people Sidney wants.”

Social networking is far faster and easier than making a trek to the water cooler. Once you try it, you’ll be hooked!

You Know You've Got It When

Six steps you can take to make sure you understand online searching.

- Use filtered settings on your favorite search engine to match your needs and talk to your teens about searching safely.
- Identify and use relevant safety controls on your web browser and operating system.
- Search for your own name and your teen’s online.
- Search Facebook, YouTube, or Flickr for information.
- Select “news,” “videos,” and “images” options on your favorite search engine.
- Know the difference between trustworthy and untrustworthy Web sites and how to identify them.