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Tip Sheet

Introduction to Social Networking

What is Social Networking?

Social Networking involves the use of the internet to connect users with their friends, family and acquaintances. Social networking websites are not necessarily about meeting new people online, although this does happen. Instead, they are primarily about connecting with friends, family and acquaintances you already have in real life. The most well known social networking sites are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and Bebo. These sites allow you to share photos, videos and information, organise events, chat, download music and even play games like Scrabble and Chess online.

Often, each of your "friends" (Facebook) or "followers" (Twitter) will be "friends" with several of your other "friends". Just like in real life, the connections between people aren't just one-on-one, but a network of connections. This online social network is very useful in spreading information, pictures and videos. For example, you can easily set up a web page with details and pictures of an event you might be planning, such as a school fete. The site allows you to easily send out invitations to other users of the social networking site. Then, if given the option by the host, those who are invited can send out more invites to their friends who might like to attend – hence, the network.

Just like other technology, for example mobile phones, social networking online can be a very effective tool for connecting with people. However, there are a few privacy and security issues it's worth keeping in mind.

Getting Started

If you are thinking about joining a social networking website, ask a friend or family member who already uses one of these sites to help set you up and show you some of the basics. It can seem a bit complex when you're getting started but once you have been using the website for a while you'll most likely find it fairly simple to navigate.

Your Profile Page

When you sign up to a social networking website you need to provide your email address to verify your identity. This will automatically create your own profile page. A profile page usually allows you to post your picture and a few general details about you, your interests, some comments from your friends and a list of your favourite music. You don't have to fill all the fields in your profile – think carefully about what you want people to know about you before you fill it in. You can usually adjust this information later on if you need to.

Privacy

Social Networking sites have a variety of privacy settings you can adjust. This means you can control who sees your profile page and other information you share on the site. Some people do not mind having their personal information available for anyone to view online. However, we strongly recommend

that you don't publish your home address and be mindful of posting other personal information about yourself (including your birthday), or others - especially if you don't have their permission.

It's worth keeping in mind that if malicious parties have access to your full name and date of birth and using other available information – for example which suburb you live in - it is possible that you could fall victim to identity theft. Just as you wouldn't give your mobile number or bank details to anyone who asked, you should guard access to all the details of your social networking account. For more on this issue, visit the SCAMwatch website: http://www.scamwatch.gov.au/content/index.phtml/tag/identitytheft

Some people who use social networking sites prefer only to allow people they have officially become friends with to see their profile and other information. It is important to note that for most social networking sites (including Facebook and MySpace) the default privacy setting is *not* to hide your information when you sign up. If you don't want your profile and other information to be seen by people who you have not authorised to be your "friend" or "follower", you will have to check these settings and adjust them accordingly after you sign up – look around the page for a link to "Privacy" or "Settings".

Friends and "Friends"

The whole point of joining social networking websites is to be in touch with your friends and family. "Friends" in the context of social networking, and Facebook in particular, has a specific meaning. For example, for you to interact online with a friend, family member or acquaintance either one of you must first send a "friend request" to the other and then have that request accepted. Once accepted, the technology recognises you as "friends" and you can interact with each other online, so you can view the other person's profile page, see their pictures, and send them messages.

Safety

On the whole, nearly all the interactions that go on via Social Networking sites are safe. However, you need to be conscious of your safety and what you want people to see of yourself and your friends. Furthermore, everyone should remember these safety tips:

1) You are not obliged to accept a friend request from someone you don't know or do not want to be in contact with.
2) Be respectful of others privacy if and when posting photos or videos of them, or mentioning them where others might read about it.
3) Be aware that you can remove someone as a "friend" and / or block them from interacting with you even after you have "accepted" them.
4) Change your privacy settings so that only your friends can see your profile page.

Teenagers and Parents

Parents should encourage an open dialogue with their primary-school aged children and teenagers about what they are doing online by asking them which social networking sites they use. Parents signing up and creating their own profile is a good way to get to know how they work. NetAlert provides practical information and advice on how to keep children, and your family, safe online: http://www.netalert.gov.au

Finally, the Australian Media and Communications Authority has released a guide which can be downloaded at: http://www.acma.gov.au/webwr/_assets/main/lib310620/cybersmart_social_networking_brochure.pdf