

6 Tips for Dating the Right Prospect

Online social networking may be a foreign concept to you, but trust me: it's not foreign to the new group of Gen Y adults who will be your clients tomorrow. Succeeding in the coming years will mean embracing (or at least, accepting) this technology and understanding how it can work for you.

And rest assured: it can work for you. Let me tell you how.

Professionally speaking, *online social networking* is more about the "networking" and less about the "social." Most of us are used to connecting with people face to face through our address books, rolodexes or PDAs, and you can easily apply the same principles to online relationships.

Services like LinkedIn and ZeroDegrees allow you to invite friends, family and colleagues to join your "group" (and through them, all of their "groups"), potentially connecting you to lots of people you may not know. And since many of these services are currently free, there's no downside to your invitees for participating.

Much like online dating, you can use these services to virtually meet people who may be able to use your products and services, which then can lead to real-life introductions... which can lead to real-life sales.

So what do you need to know? The same rules that apply to online dating apply for professional online networking:

- 1) **Always get a picture.** Make sure you know as much as possible about your prospect and their company before you meet them. Is this someone you may want to see again?
- 2) **Use email to see if this person is someone you'd want to spend time with.** Sometimes the resume and research make a prospect sound perfect, but when you start learning what they do day-to-day, you may realize they're not the person in a position to actually buy your products. If not, change your expectations.
- 3) **Invite a friend.** If you realize that your prospect is not necessarily the one who can decide to work with your company, ask them to invite a friend... preferably a friend who is the decision maker you seek. This way, you can extend your network with the prospect which may make closing the sale a bit easier.
- 4) **Start with coffee; if it goes well, you can always move on to dinner.** Remember that this first meeting is meant to solidify your prospect's suitability for your products and services; this is not the time to close a deal. Use this time to make a personal connection, learn more about their particular needs and establish a level of trust.
- 5) **If it goes well, ask for a second date right away.** Assuming all goes well and your prospect is as interested as you are, don't be shy. Secure a follow-up appointment to deliver information, learn about a new RFP they're launching, or present a more in-depth demonstration of your company's offerings. Remember the adage: he who hesitates, is lost.



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- 6) **And if you had a good time, call to say so.** Don't forget your manners. After your meeting, regardless of the outcome, email a thank-you to your prospect. They were gracious enough to give you some of their valuable time, and even if it doesn't work out with them, you have a chance to make a good impression that will live beyond this meeting.

Online social networking doesn't have to be a scary prospect. In fact, you might realize how time-efficient it can be in managing your prospecting and spreading the word about your company.

Next month, we'll explore how you can use outdoor media to its best advantage.



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