

Last week I took a leap into the year 2007 and signed up for Facebook. My wife has been a Facebook user for over a year. My female children have been users for a lot of years and I think are as close to achieving "expert" status, if there is such a thing. Son Ted is on Facebook, but not very active. I have been thinking about joining, and finally decided to take the plunge.

My goal in becoming a Facebook user was not necessarily for the normal reasons; not to re-connect with high school classmates or see how many "friends" I can garner, or even play Farmville. No, I joined simply because; a) I was curious; b) a lot of marketing gurus say that you need to be on Facebook to do an effective job of marketing your company and c) my real life friend Rick Hermann says Facebook is like crack, and I wanted to see what he really meant.

Daughter Jenni helped get me started. She helped me set up a basic profile, downloaded a picture and helped me learn some of the basics of asking people to become friends. Of course the first person I wanted to be my friend is my wife, but since Jenni was doing a lot of the set up for me, Jenni became my first friend, but Joanne became my second friend. While I was off doing something else, Jenni set requests to be friends with over two dozen people that she knew.

Is it important for your company to be on Facebook? Or is it simply a fun diversion for kids and baby boomers? To help answer the question, I found an article by Jesse Stanchak, who writes a blog on Social Media. He asked his readers to tell him which social network has generated the most viral traffic for them. An astounding 51.38% said Facebook. 25.41% said Twitter; 8.29% LinkedIn; 6.08% YouTube; 5.52% were not sure and the last 3.31% said other. Since Facebook has approximately 600 million subscribers, well the sheer size of that is incredible.

But most businesses don't need to reach 600 million people. They only need to reach enough people with the right message to increase their sales and improve profits. I have seen several of the ads on Facebook and have not been impressed. For those businesses who's Facebook pages I have found, it looks like an interesting forum for people to talk about what is on their mind. But those pages need to be updated regularly to keep them interesting, which could be a challenge.

I think that Facebook and Twitter and the other forms of social media are here to stay. It will take a while for businesses, large and small to figure out exactly how to make the best use of them. In the meantime I encourage you to spend some time on Facebook and Twitter. Not necessarily to find long lost classmates or play Farmville, but to check out the sites and pages that interest you and see how they take advantage of this phenomenon.

Since it has only been a couple of days, I haven't explored much of what Facebook can do. I haven't "posted on somebody's wall" or even found many company Facebook pages. However I am still looking around, reading the postings on my wall. With any luck I will jump from 2007 to 2011!

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*