

## Member Networking in a Regulated Profession: AssociCom is not Facebook

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Social networking communities have progressed well beyond the 'fad' stage. They are proven, valuable tools for connecting their members around areas of common interest. The most noteworthy example, Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>), has a membership base of 200 million members engaging in social activities.

However, despite Facebook's apparent ubiquity and status as the most populous social network, it is only one example of a wide variety of on-line networking communities, each with very diverse characteristics and member interactions. For example, LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>) is an open network focused not on social interactions, but on general professional networking. It has over 40 million professional members including members from all of the fortune 500 companies. There are also closed professional networks where membership is not available to the general public. In large business this is referred to as enterprise 2.0; a network deployed within large enterprise to connect its employees. Another closed network example is AssociCom – built specifically to meet the needs of professional associations and societies. Closed networks in professional associations and societies strengthen connections between members, enable continuous learning experiences, accelerate the integration of new members, help disseminate information, and strengthen the association as a whole. They form a cohesive bond among the members, the association executive and staff to a degree that is not otherwise possible.

Despite these benefits, those new to the idea of professional networks may incorrectly equate all member networks with social sites such as Facebook; sites which have not always enjoyed a positive reputation. This is a significant impediment because professional associations are often more than simple aggregations of members seeking to benefit from the experiences and knowledge of their peers. Many associations are also regulatory bodies responsible for upholding the standards and reputation of the profession they serve. As such they are, by necessity, cautious about adopting any new practice or technology that could compromise their standards in any way, regardless of the potential benefit. Fortunately, while social networking and professional member networking do share common roots, they are fundamentally different. The negative issues of true social networks such as Facebook are exceedingly rare (and typically non-existent) in professional member networks.

So – what is the difference between professional member networking and social networks such as Facebook? There are several fundamental differences.

The first fundamental difference is the expectation of the community itself. Facebook exists as a **social** community. Since that is the purpose of the community, people join with that goal in mind. It is not

foremost a learning community, a business community, or any other specific kind of community other than social. When visiting on-line business networking communities, learning communities, religious communities, or any other kind of purpose-built community, it is immediately apparent that the nature of the interaction is defined by the nature of the members and community. A case in point is the 40-million member professional community of LinkedIn, mentioned above. The interactions in LinkedIn are respectful, professional and information-filled with the purpose of creating and maintaining professional contacts and exchanging professional information and opportunities. It is a business community exhibiting business-like behaviour and interactions. The same is true for other purpose-built networks. The community and the expectations of the members define the content and interactions.

The second fundamental difference between professional member networks and open social networks such as Facebook is that professional member networks can be closed communities open only to members of an association. Although it is not possible to prevent a member from sharing private information outside the association, outsiders do not otherwise have access to any of the documents or communications that exist within the network. This is highly valuable in that it provides an avenue of communication for members, staff and executive that is more private than the existing alternatives such as the media, association meetings, blogs, or open networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook. If a membership issue or concern exists, it will inevitably surface in some forum. It could be argued that the availability of a closed member network reduces the risk of a membership issue or concern being raised in a more public forum. Issues that appear in the membership network will come to the attention of the association immediately, can be dealt with more efficiently before they escalate in complexity or exposure, and are more likely to remain a private matter of the membership.

The third fundamental difference is in the technology itself. Unlike other member networking systems, AssociCom has been created specifically for professional associations and societies. As such it implements features which are oriented toward professional, as opposed to social interactions. For example, AssociCom attributes every comment, every document and every interaction to the member responsible. This encourages all members to be thoughtful in their actions and interactions. In addition, as a platform for associations and societies, AssociCom provides privacy and security features which are not present (or important) in other networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn or other member community platforms. AssociCom also provides features which allow the association to be immediately alerted to, and take immediate action on any issue which may arise within the network. Finally, AssociCom enables the creation and prominent presentation of an acceptable use policy as defined by the professional association. This is useful in establishing and reminding members of the purpose of the network and in establishing the expectations of the community.

In closing, it should be noted that although Facebook's technology and community differ from those of AssociCom, Facebook is exceedingly successful at connecting people around areas of common interest. That is why it is enormously popular, enjoying a membership base of 200 million members, with the fastest growing segment being members over 35 years old. Many of the same techniques used in Facebook are indeed the same ones that are responsible for the great potential of AssociCom's professional member networks. In the latter case, however, the techniques are adapted to support a community of professionals centered on the common professional interests of practice, projects,

education, and professional networking. The bottom line is that these are professional networks, not social networks, and therefore they do not share the popularized, negative aspects of some existing social networks.

Murray Goldberg – AssociCom (murray@ AssociCom.com)