



Middle-age entrepreneurs turn to social networking

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By ANGELA SHAH / The Dallas Morning News
ashah@dallasnews.com

Fred Thompson, owner of an American Leak Detection franchise in Fort Worth, admits a certain amount of tech ignorance – at least when it comes to social networking Web sites like Facebook, MySpace and YouTube.

Sure, he's heard of the popular sites, but "how they work, I have no idea."

Still, he understands that demographics are pushing this online world straight at him.

Increasingly, small businesses are turning to such sites as a way to reach young customers who have embraced them as part of their lives.

For firms with little money to spend on advertising, the Web sites can be a cheap, efficient marketing tool.

Essentially, a business sets up a profile much like an individual would but posts information on services offered and at what prices instead of the age and interests an individual might list.

Then the entrepreneur searches individual profiles for people who might be interested in his product and invites them to join his network as "friends" – in this case, potential customers. They will then receive any messages his company sends.

Terri Robinson, 46-year-old founder of Dive Monster Scuba in Lewisville, has been sending regular bulletins to MySpace users with profiles showing an interest in the outdoors. The result? An uptick in young divers coming to her store.

Joy Kauf, who owns the nearby Messages of Joy, first went to the expense of hiring someone to build a Web site for her metaphysical gift shop and salon, which sells items like crystals and oracle card decks.

"I ended up losing my money," said the 44-year-old. "It fell apart. It was so complicated I wasn't going to be able to manage it."

But with just the help of some customers' children, she launched a MySpace page a few months ago. Now she easily signs on to MySpace.com, logs into her profile and updates her calendar of events, including the classes in shamanism, reiki energy healing and meditation. Access to the site, like many of the others, is free after registering.

"Once you get the hang of it, it's pretty easy," Ms. Kauf said.

Not surprisingly, the younger the entrepreneur, the more likely the person is to use such tools, according to a recent Discover card survey of small businesses. Membership in general online networking sites reached as high as 41 percent for 18- to 29-year-olds but was significantly lower among older groups, the survey found.

At 58, though, Mr. Thompson is game. "I guess I'm always open as a business owner if someone can show me how I can grow my business with the Internet," he said.

LET'S GET TOGETHER

Social networking Web sites have attracted tens of millions of young users. And that attracts businesses interested in marketing to them.

Site	Founded	Description	Users
MySpace	2003	Online community connecting friends and their friends' friends. Users create personal profiles.	Nearly 70 million in the U.S.
Facebook	2004	Started by Harvard University students as an online yearbook. Now used by others as well to keep up with friends, upload photos, and share links and videos.	Nearly 30 million
YouTube	2005	Web site for viewing and sharing original videos worldwide.	Nearly 20 million each month

SOURCE: *Dallas Morning News* research