

Mum... get out of my Facebook

Connecting with adolescents without stepping on their digital turf

By Michael McQueen



Parents know it well and 400 million Facebook subscribers leave us with little doubt: Generation Y loves to express itself online. The internet is where this group does its sharing, its courting, its learning and its networking. Life, friendship and interaction have become an increasingly digital pursuit for Gen Y and Gen Z.

There are a number of theories as to why this is. Perhaps it is due to the instant nature of the internet: young people can (and do) log on and catch up with friends at any hour of the day or night. Some have suggested that it is due to the anonymity that the internet seemingly provides. To this list, though, I would add a third possible reason. The internet is a great place for Gen Y to meet because it is somewhere their parents are not... that is until recently.

Parents, employers and even educators are flocking to social networking sites in an effort to make the connections and build the relationships they so long for with the young people they raise, lead and work with. In fact, you may be surprised to learn that the fastest growing segment of Facebook users is over the age of 25 according to a recent article in the Washington Post.

So what are young people making of this earnest (and potentially misguided) attempt by their parents and others to encroach on their digital turf. Do they see it as an indication that the oldies around them are 'cool', hip and progressive, or is it seen (in the language of Gen Y) as 'try hard'? My guess is that except for in very rare situations, the latter is probably the case.

Many older generations have figured out that if you want to connect with today's young people, taking an active interest in their lives, experiences and technology is key. However, what happens when taking an active interest becomes counterproductive? Are there ways of showing an interest in your children, students and employees' lives without overstepping the mark? I would suggest that there are certainly ways of doing so.

Here are five effective offline strategies that I have come across in my work with parents, educators and employers:

1. Create space and an environment where conversations can start and develop naturally. The challenge for organisations and parents is to foster events and experiences that give space and time for conversations and relationships to build. One business I worked with recently has gone a long way to achieving this in their fortnightly staff meetings. For the last 12 months, they have started off each meeting with an ongoing darts match. The managers described how, even though this only takes ten minutes each fortnight, it creates an atmosphere where people start conversations that lead to topics of common interest. Other companies have reported that offsite activity days and fun events like pancake lunches work wonders for the level of connection and rapport within a team. If you are an employer, these kinds of initiatives can be significant in that they allow your team to see you outside the role of manager.

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2. Develop a genuine interest. Time and time again I speak with parents who have heard a lot about Facebook, MySpace or Twitter but will then talk to other parents in order to find out what these sites are all about. Often the response of the other parents is that, although they don't really know how the sites work either, they certainly don't think they are a good thing. I ask parents who have done this if they ever considered actually sitting down with their son or daughter and genuinely asking them what Facebook and MySpace are. You would be amazed the difference that showing a genuine

interest in the technology and world of your son or daughter will make. I am not talking about the sort of interest where you seek out information in order to offer your opinion or judgement. Rather, I am talking about asking the question with no strings attached. As a parent, you will get a lot further with your child if you seek to understand before you seek to be understood.

3. Leverage events of shared experience. Everyday there are events and circumstances that occur at a societal level that represent opportunities for starting a conversation. Whether it was the violent storm over the weekend, the final episode of a long-running TV series, or a tragedy in the news, try not to be in such a rush to get on with the day-to-day business of life that you fail to pause and use these experiences as an opportunity to build rapport by sharing perspectives, feelings and opinions. Events that lead to a sense of shared experience are a gift to those keen to develop relationships across the generational divide.

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4. Engage in two-way conversation. In your effort to take an interest in the lives of the young people you interact with on a daily basis, be careful not to come across as insincere or forceful in asking questions. Remember that relationships are two-way and young people will develop a natural interest in your life and background as you show one in theirs. A reluctance or hesitation to give or share anything of yourself will create suspicion with this group because your interest will come across as inauthentic.

5. Be proactive in research. If you discover things about the young people you are working with and take the proactive step to educate yourself about the things that interest them, it will speak volumes. Probably the best example of this I have come across in my travels was the senior school teacher who had made the commitment years ago to buy and read the local community newspaper each week so she could find out how her students' sporting teams had gone the week before so she could ask them about it specifically.

6. Diarise points for follow-up. Life is busy and all too often we forget names, dates and details within minutes of a conversation. One employer I spoke with at a conference had recognised the importance of showing an interest in her younger staff's lives and developed a system to ensure that she remembered the things they talked about. Her system consisted of simply scheduling reminders in her phone of dates and events that her staff had mentioned so that she could follow these up. Whether it was the wedding of a sister, family visiting from overseas or something as simple as a birthday, she described the power of remembering and following up on conversations she had with her younger staff. Over the space of just a few months, she noticed a significant difference in the level of rapport and connection she had with them.

Developing an interest in the young people that you interact with on a daily basis is a powerful key to developing a rapport-driven engaging relationship. You don't need to be online to connect with this group in fact it is what you do offline in the day to day of life that will often have the biggest impact.



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