

How to Use LinkedIn to Effectively Boost Your Career Development

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ABSTRACT

Most of us have a LinkedIn profile and are connected with other professionals. But how can you make your LinkedIn activity really boost your career development? In this paper, from the perspectives of both a SAS® programmer looking for jobs and a consultant looking for projects, I first describe your target market. With this target market in mind, I then describe the process of building up your profile, finding appropriate LinkedIn Groups (and posting to them), publishing on LinkedIn Pulse, and developing an effective network of connections.

Finally, let's remember that this is a long-term process and that LinkedIn is best used as an accompaniment for face-to-face meetings and not a substitute for them.

If you effectively use these strategies (or develop similar ones on your own), you should have considerably more and better career opportunities than you ever had before!

INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE FULL POWER OF LINKEDIN

Let's use my story to illustrate the full power of LinkedIn.

I run an analytics company focused on marketing analytics for community banks and credit unions. I've been active in the SAS users community since 2007, and within a few years had a strong reputation among that community. However, it was still very difficult for me to find jobs and projects through my network. My problem was that I had the wrong *target market*. Even though I was well known and respected among SAS programmers, these aren't people who would hire me!

In 2013 I started attending conferences and other events for decision makers and influencers within the community bank and credit union community. It was successful but still very slow. Even at well attended conferences, I would meet just a handful of the right people, and they would know me as just another attendee.

Although I had the right target market, my problem now was that I couldn't reach many people and wasn't known as an expert. Both problems could be solved by presenting my work at their events, but this was difficult because I didn't yet work with a financial institution. This was an impasse: I couldn't get chosen as a presenter and develop a reputation without proving myself with my target market, and I couldn't get hired within my target market without being a presenter. This situation didn't change even after I had finished a project in this target market and presented it at a SAS Users Group conference (Derby and Keintz, 2015). This was incredibly frustrating.

Everything changed over a 6-week period in the spring of 2016. In this short time period, suddenly lots of my target audience were talking to me and I got sales into the pipeline. What changed?

- I started publishing articles on LinkedIn.
- I cross-referenced those articles on multiple LinkedIn Groups that my target audience subscribed to.
- I started connecting with people in my target market.

This was fantastic! But **this didn't just happen**. This was the culmination of many months of tweaking my profile, choosing the right LinkedIn Groups, writing the right articles, and expanding my network.

This paper describes every part of this process so that you can find success over a period of months rather than years. Of course you'll learn your own mistakes, but learn from mine first! These steps can apply to you whether you're looking for a direct-hire job or for a contract project.

DEFINE YOUR TARGET MARKET

Before you think about your LinkedIn strategy, you need to define your *target market*. Whom are you trying to reach? Connecting with many programmers like yourself might feel great, but they aren't going to hire you. Think of this question: *Whom do you want to hire you?*

This may be a harder question to answer than it might at first seem. If your answer is "anyone who is hiring," let's explore this. Do you *really* mean anyone? As examples,

- *How about employers/clients in another part of the country?* Are you willing to move away or travel?
- *How about employers/clients in very different industries?* Are you willing to constantly change industries?
- *How about projects that pay very little?* Are you willing to work for little pay?
- *How about boring projects?* Are you looking for more interesting work?

There's enough demand in analytics for you to be picky! So why not choose a strategy to find your most satisfying work?

If you're active in SAS users groups, you probably know the careers of Art Carpenter ([goo.gl/v9SOZB](https://www.linkedin.com/in/v9SOZB)) and Kirk Lafler ([goo.gl/3xiIgI](https://www.linkedin.com/in/3xiIgI)). Both are *generalists*, working across many different industries and projects. However, both are experienced authors and instructors, for whom their books and courses are a major part of their career. Those books and courses also serve as valuable marketing, assuring that the projects presented to them are generally too difficult for others to do and thus are well paid. Although their target market is the SAS users community, their success is very difficult to duplicate.

It's generally much easier to have a *niche market* of some kind of specialty within an industry. Here are some examples of people in the SAS users community who have various niche markets:

- *Tricia Aanderud* ([goo.gl/pbc6HO](https://www.linkedin.com/in/pbc6HO)): Visual analytics (cross-industry).
- *Richard Allen* ([goo.gl/JfZnLV](https://www.linkedin.com/in/JfZnLV)): Pharmaceuticals and health outcomes research.
- *Frank Ferriola* ([goo.gl/kY2Iqf](https://www.linkedin.com/in/kY2Iqf)): Financial risk.
- *Jon Francis* ([goo.gl/HCU3IY](https://www.linkedin.com/in/HCU3IY)): Retail and marketing analytics.
- *Josh Horstman* ([goo.gl/TrgmCT](https://www.linkedin.com/in/TrgmCT)): Clinical trials.
- *Suzanne Humphreys* ([goo.gl/0MzQoh](https://www.linkedin.com/in/0MzQoh)): Clinical research.
- *Steve Overton* ([goo.gl/pvJozM](https://www.linkedin.com/in/pvJozM)): Anti-Money Laundering (Financial).

You can see from the career paths of the people above that they have chosen a market niche, developing specialized skills over a few years. They're well networked within their market niche (whether through LinkedIn or in person) so that career opportunities generally come to them instead of the other way around. That's the power of being well networked!

WHAT IS YOUR BEST NICHE MARKET?

Whether you're looking for a direct-hire job or a contract, here are some questions to think about:

- *What is your area of interest?* This may or may not be in the industry you're currently in. If you want to change your industry, why not make a plan to change? You can rebrand yourself by using some of the steps in this paper.
- *What is your area of expertise?* This is different from the above question. This can either be industry expertise (e.g., anti-money laundering) or statistical expertise (e.g., visual analytics). Does your expertise have a use in your area of interest above? If not, can you tweak your area of expertise to match your area of interest? (More information about this is in Lafler (2016))
- *How big is your niche market?* You can do this formally by looking at industry statistics, or informally by looking at job listings. Is this niche market growing or shrinking?

- *How much are your skills in demand?* This is different from the above question. There's a huge niche market for advanced Excel skills, but since there's also a huge supply of people with those skills, there isn't much demand for them. Is this demand growing or shrinking? This leads to a related question:
 - *How much competition do you have in this niche market?* Who are they and how good are they? If you have lots of competition but have more skills than most of them, you'll probably succeed! (But you may need effective marketing to get into the market)
- *How difficult is it to get access to this niche market?* Do you just need to connect with the right people, or are there extra qualifications? Do you need government clearance or special credentials? Is it especially difficult to connect with these people? One special case of this:
 - *Can you access this niche market from where you live?* Many regions have specializations. For Seattle, it's software, retail, and healthcare. Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco are financial centers. Indianapolis and Raleigh are big pharmaceutical centers. If you live far away from your target industry, can you find a way to access it anyway? Telecommuting is much more accessible than just a few years ago, especially when combined with a few plane trips.

You don't have to have everything figured out at once, but think about where you're headed. This is especially relevant if you're at the beginning of your career or are changing careers. You may have to settle for a low-level job now, but you have plenty of time to position yourself for growth later on.

If you've got challenges, look for mentors! In virtually any industry and expertise, there are people who have been there before. Offer to connect with them, asking for advice.

If you try out something you don't like, don't be afraid to change your mind later on. It's very easy to change direction early in your career.

WHO ARE IN YOUR TARGET MARKET?

Once you have your target market in mind, let's look for the people in this market! You're looking for *decision makers* and *influencers*:

- *Decision makers* are people who have the power to hire you. If you're looking for a job, these are often mid-level managers. If you're looking to get hired as a contractor or vendor, these might be executives (e.g., CEO, Chief Operations Officer, VP of Marketing, etc), depending on the size of the institution.
- *Influencers* are people who influence the decision makers, such as project managers, lead programmers, or assistant VPs.

Get to know at least a couple of these people well, even if the only person available is your boss. Pay close attention to their interests, language, level of comfort, and other aspects. What are major issues to them? The more people you know, the better. If you attend an event focused on them (such as a conference), what are the most-attended sessions that fit your area of interest or expertise?

BUILD YOUR PROFILE

Now that you have a target market, let's look at your LinkedIn profile from the point of view of your target market. Think about the following:

- *Language:* If you have technical terms like "ARIMA Modeling" or a list of technical languages, this probably isn't going to work. Use language that the decision makers in your target industry can understand. What problem are you solving?
- *Brevity:* Do you use bullet points instead of long paragraphs? If you have lots of awards, can you organize them into them into short lists? Compare yourself to others in your industry. If it's common to have long lists of awards, go ahead and include your long list.
- *Organization:* Are your most recent/important items on the top?
- *Visual Layout:* Does your profile look organized or cluttered? Do you have a professional photo?

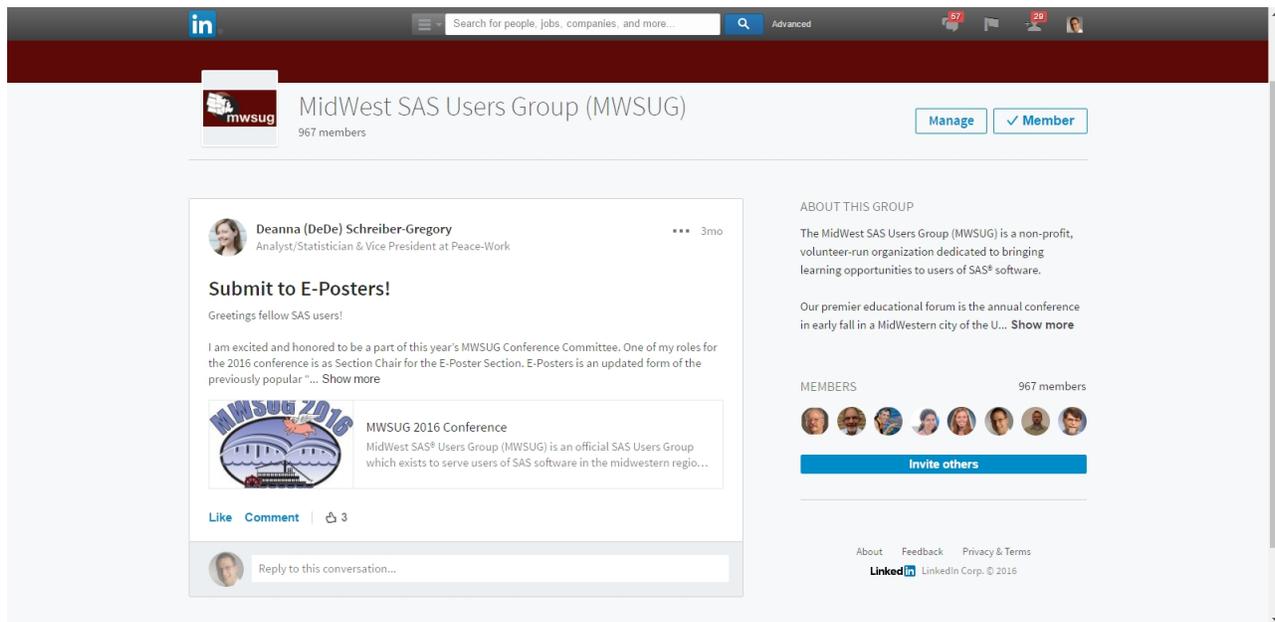


Figure 1: A LinkedIn Group post showing a short post and a link to a larger article or website.

- *Job Titles and Summaries*: With the above in mind, do they explain your prior jobs in a language that your target market understands? Do they support the job or project that you want? Don't be afraid to use some artistic license or selective omissions to look attractive to your target market.
- *Overall Title and Summary*: Do they effectively summarize all of this?

However, **before you do anything, be sure to change one default setting**: Under *Privacy & Settings* in the upper right drop-down menu (under your profile photo), click on *Manage* and then *Privacy*. Click on the fifth item, *Sharing profile edits*. Then click on the toggle to choose "No." Otherwise, every change you make to your profile will be broadcast to your network.

Feel free to ask for outside opinions or tweak certain items over time.

RESEARCH LINKEDIN GROUPS

Now that you have your profile, how can you effectively use it? You will want to publish . . . but before you do, look at *where* you can effectively publish and cross-reference your articles. As with everything else, this is with your target market in mind.

LinkedIn has two places where you can publish:

- *LinkedIn Pulse* ([linkedin.com/pulse](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse)): These articles are publicly viewable and typically longer. Because they are publicly viewable, they can easily get more views than articles on LinkedIn Groups—but for the same reason, they typically get fewer comments. People often feel more comfortable commenting in a forum with a more restrictive membership and/or a membership of people more like themselves.
- *LinkedIn Groups* ([linkedin.com/groups](https://www.linkedin.com/groups)): These articles (posts) are viewable only to the target audience and are typically shorter. As shown in Figure 1, they often cross-reference larger articles—on Pulse or somewhere else.

You can use these two sources together fairly effectively: Publish an article on LinkedIn Pulse, but cross-reference them with teaser articles (and a link) from several LinkedIn Groups. You can even customize the teaser to the audience in question. Then readers can choose to comment either on the Pulse article or on the teaser article. In either case you'll be notified on LinkedIn and should respond to engage them.

That's the basic setup, with one major step left out: **Which LinkedIn Groups should you join and publish on?** This requires a little research. For this, you'll need need to join as many groups as you can find that might be interesting to your target market, under two stipulations:

- You can join up to 100 groups (which is plenty).
- You can only have up to 10 *pending* group applications at one time.

You'll probably join more groups than you need, then decide to leave a few of them. Because of the second issue above, it will take you a while to join many groups, but keep at it! In October 2015 LinkedIn made a few changes to Groups that make it quicker to join: Anyone in the group (not just the moderators) can let you in. Therefore, when you connect to some people who are in these groups, they can let you in if the moderator doesn't (such as when the moderator isn't paying attention to the group).

When you've gotten into a few groups, take a look at some aspects:

- How many members of the group are there? (More is better)
- How active is the group? How often do people post or comment? (More active ones are better)
- How many *discussions* are there rather than just posts? Are there posts with discussions in the comments? (More with discussions are better)
- Is it the same people posting or are there occasionally new people? (Occasional new people is better)

The more valuable groups are ones with lots of posts with real discussions that *engage* people. Posts that just promote services are generally considered spam, which most people dislike and/or ignore. Likewise, people naturally ignore LinkedIn groups with lots of promotional ("spammy") posts.

Having said that, feel free to also join some LinkedIn Groups just for fun! A nice example is the WUSS LinkedIn Group. Here you can get as techy as you want without worrying about what your target market is thinking, since there are typically few decision makers in that group.

PUBLISH, PUBLISH, PUBLISH

Now you're ready to publish! But **be aware of your target audience at all times**. Only publish articles on LinkedIn Pulse that you want your target market (and everyone else on the internet) to see. Everything else should be confined to a LinkedIn Group, viewable only to that specific audience. A nice example is from July 1, 2016, the 40th anniversary of SAS Institute. As shown in Figure 2, Kirk Lafler and I both posted about it, but I posted it to the WUSS LinkedIn Group, whereas he posted it on LinkedIn Pulse. Both were appropriate for our respective audiences:

- My target audience (at community banks and credit unions) doesn't care about SAS and often doesn't even know what it is. So I posted it on a forum that would only be seen by people who do care about SAS.
- Kirk Lafler's target audience (the SAS community) very much *does* care about SAS! So he wants to maximize his visibility to them, which he does by publishing on LinkedIn Pulse.

Feel free to publish as much as you want in LinkedIn Groups that your target market doesn't see. In fact, doing so can give you good practice, especially if you're shy about posting (as I was when I first started doing this). Posting in a friendly environment can develop your confidence. Here are some other considerations:

- *Think about which topics to publish.* What does your target market want to know about? Naturally you want to discuss analytics, but you may want to also include a fun article here and there, such as industry events. Pay attention to news. For example, if some new data compliance rule comes into effect on a certain date, prepare an article to discuss that. My first Pulse article got over 500 views in my target market, partially because I commented on a result from an industry-wide survey which had just been released a couple days before.
- *Give away free information and advice.* You'll find it's a magnet for potential customers. Is there some publicly available industry data that needs to be analyzed?

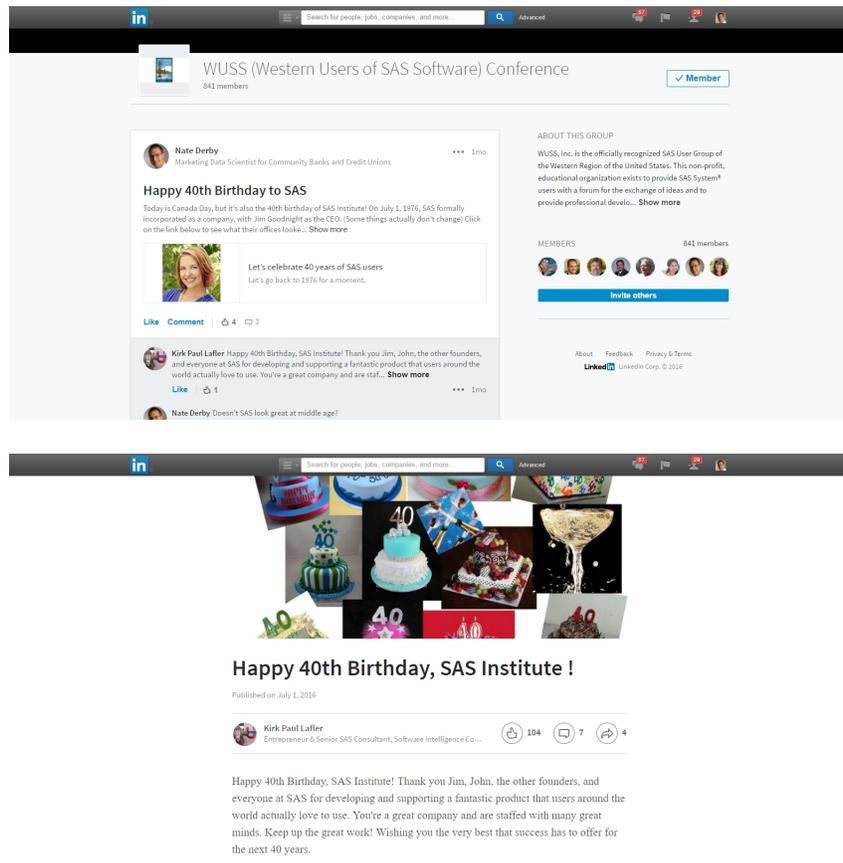


Figure 2: My LinkedIn Group post (top) and Kirk Lafler's LinkedIn article (bottom) about SAS' 40th anniversary.

- *You might want to put together a publishing calendar*, determining when you'll post about certain things.
- *Experiment with when to publish.* Lots of people check their LinkedIn Group posts during the week (especially on a Tuesday), so you'd think that if you publish on a Tuesday morning, that will maximize your visibility. However, especially for LinkedIn Groups with over 1000 subscribers, everyone else looking for maximal visibility will publish on a Tuesday morning as well. Therefore, if you publish on a Tuesday morning, by Tuesday afternoon there may be over 10 posts above yours. Conversely, if you post on a Saturday morning, you could easily be the top post until Monday morning.
- *Aim for discussions.* Typically LinkedIn Groups with fewer subscribers has more subscribers active in discussions than Groups with more subscribers. The same goes for posting over the weekend. Engagement (through discussions) is a key tool to see if a potential client is interested in your services.
- *Use a picture and good title.* It's been statistically proven that articles with a picture and good title get read more than those without one of those. If you're putting in lots of effort into writing an article, why not spend a little time on a picture and good title to make sure it gets read?

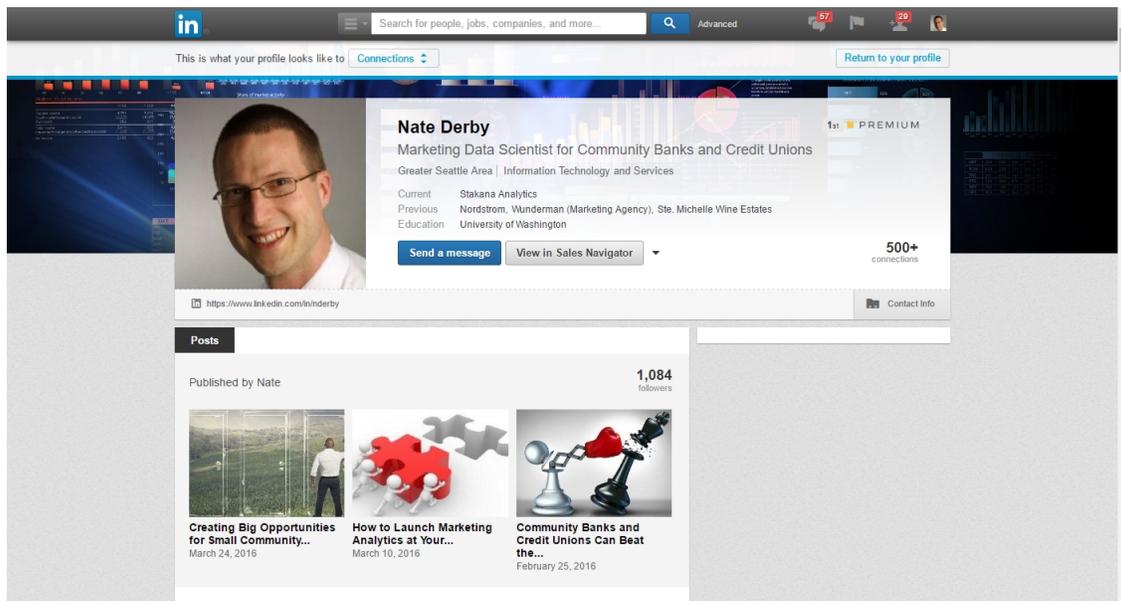


Figure 3: My profile, prominently showing my Pulse articles with eye-catching titles.

BUILD YOUR NETWORK

Once you've published a couple articles on Pulse (and cross referenced it in the right places), you'll find that it's much easier to connect with people. This is because now when someone looks at your profile (as shown in Figure 3), that person sees your articles very prominently! It's more prominent than even your job listings. Anyone looking at your profile can immediately see that you're so engaged in your work that you write articles about it. (They may even read the article, but don't count on it)

Since this is such valuable real estate on your profile, why not maximize it? **Try to write three Pulse articles so that this entire row of your profile is full.** It's fine if you want to stop at three articles for a while. As it is, I wrote my last article on March 24, four months from the date I'm writing this paper. But that hasn't hurt me at all.

Before I published those three articles, it was very difficult to make connections. Now it's so simple that I regularly solicit and get connections to people I've never met before.

Now that you have all the magic in place, connect with as many people as possible! But take your time and learn about what works for making those connections. You won't gain anything by writing to 20 people at once and annoying all of them. Try connecting with two people every day with different messages.

By the way, you should protect your connections! That is, you should set up your account so that your connections only see what connections you have in common, rather than *all* of your connections. There are three main reasons for this:

- Just as with your LinkedIn Groups, you might use your profile for multiple audiences—but you'd like to look well connected to each of them. For example, I have contacts among the financial industry, the retail industry, the SAS users community, and the entrepreneur community, with little overlap between them. If any of them looks at my profile, they will see our common contacts, showing only our relevant overlap.
- Especially if you're just starting out, you may not want to advertise the fact that you don't know many decision makers or influencers in your target market. Keep them guessing!
- Likewise, you don't want to make it easy for a potential competitor to connect with you and then see everyone you're connected with—and know which potential clients you're talking to. Keep them guessing!

How do you do this? Under *Privacy & Settings* in the upper right drop-down menu (under your profile photo), click on *Manage* and then *Privacy*. As shown in Figure 4, click on the second item, *Who can see your connections*. Then click on "Only you."

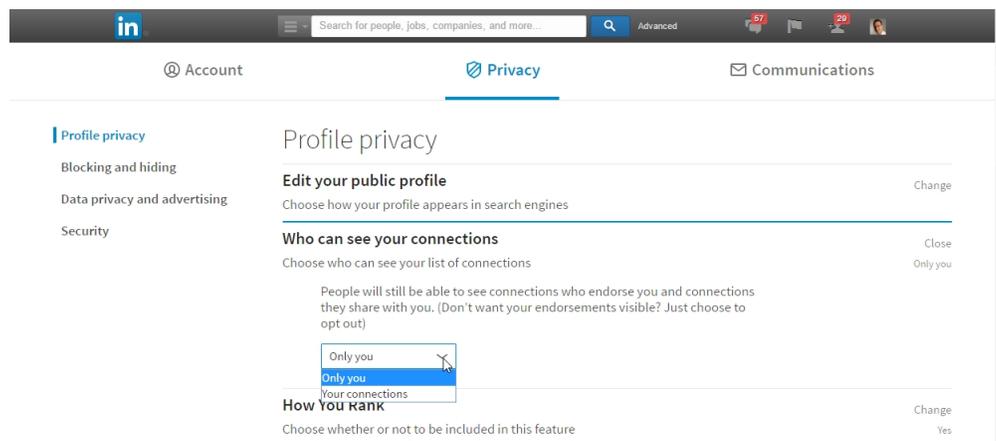


Figure 4: Setting up your privacy settings to hide your connections.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Here are some other considerations you might want to have in mind with your LinkedIn strategy.

YOUR NEWS FEED

Your news feed is the home screen you get when you go to their website (i.e., [linkedin.com](https://www.linkedin.com)). Do you see all that activity from your connections? All of your connections can see what you're doing too! You may or may not want that. A few thoughts:

- I prefer having my contacts see my activity as long as it pertains to my target market. So I'm happy to "like" or comment on certain news items that other people in my target market post.
- The more contacts you get in your target market, the more relevant news items you'll see. This gives you a front row seat into what your target market is thinking about, which is fantastic market research!
- Whatever you post in a LinkedIn Group is only visible to your contacts within that group, so you're safe there.
- What gets you into trouble is when you "like" or comment on something that has nothing to do with your target market. Remember that this is a form of marketing, and you really want to stay on message.
- Happily, there's an easy solution to this problem! If you comment on or "like" something that isn't ideal for your target market, you can delete it from your feed. From your top menu bar, go to *Profile* → *Your Updates*. Then, as shown in Figure 5 on page 9, click on the arrow on the upper right of the update you'd like to delete and click to the *Delete* option. This doesn't delete what you actually did. If you wrote a comment, it's still there (viewable only by people who could see that thread before you wrote the comment). It just deletes it from your feed so that your network doesn't see it in their news feed.
Your network will see this on their news feed for a few minutes, but this shouldn't be a big deal. Most people of importance aren't regularly checking their news feed.
- This should go without saying, but it's generally wise to keep personal opinions off of LinkedIn entirely! This especially includes religion, politics, or sex. Many of your connections haven't met you in person and will form first impressions of you based on your online activity.

USING PAID INMAIL

If you have the paid version of LinkedIn, you can write to people you're not connected to through InMail. This can be especially important when you're just starting out. Be direct, friendly, and to the point . . . and accept that fact that very few people will respond to you. But keep it up anyway. I found my first two paid customers through paid InMail!

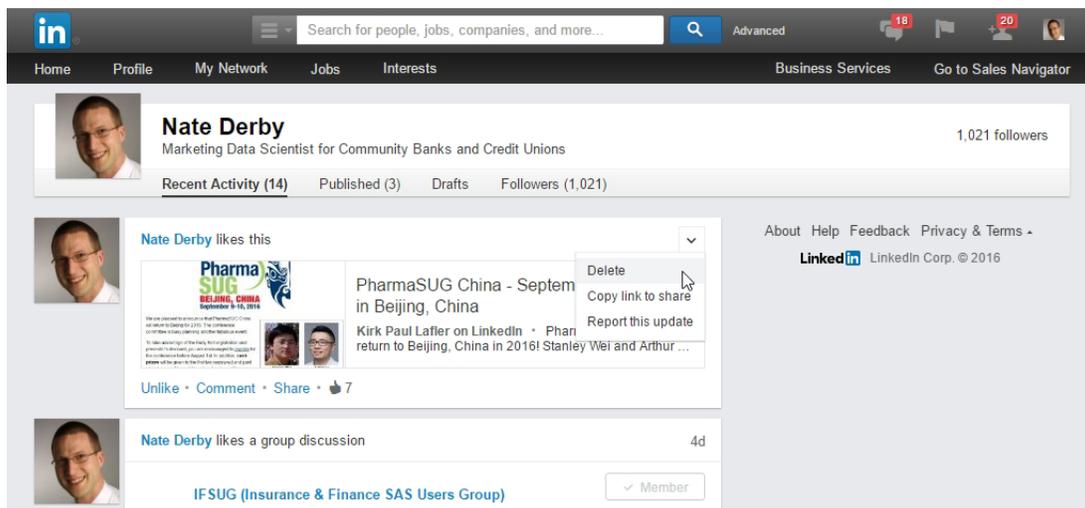


Figure 5: Deleting an item from your news feed.

COMPANY PAGE

If you want to create your own company with more than one person, you might consider a company page. This can be a useful way of showing that the company is bigger than just you. It's more acceptable to put promotional material on your company page than on LinkedIn Groups.

OTHER SOCIAL NETWORKS

You might consider using Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus, or perhaps another social network. However, be aware that **LinkedIn is generally the most effective social network for business-to-business activity**. And unlike other social networks, it's rarely blocked at work.

BEYOND SOCIAL NETWORKS

Remember that **LinkedIn (or any social network) is an extension of your network and not a replacement for it!** Find ways to meet your target market in person. Attend (and preferably present at) conferences. Meet them in person. Be energetic and informative. Feel free to be nerdy about their issues, but try to hold back your techy interests. Decision makers rarely care about which database or statistical procedures you're using. All they care about is that you know what you're doing. So project that impression!

More generally, remember that **you're building your personal brand**, which naturally takes time. Just keep at it!

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank Kirk Lafler for his inspiration over the years to get me to experiment with LinkedIn!

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