LinkedIn For Thought Leaders

The Ultimate Guide

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, one prevalent lesson – and one that continues to grow in significance year over year – is the importance of having a digital presence. From websites to social profiles to "Google My Business" pages, a digital presence signals validity and, to some degree, success.

Sure, it can be argued that, in the context of your personal life, limiting your time online can be a good thing. Within our own team, we certainly believe this and try to balance our time accordingly.

But, as an expert business owner, the more virtually visible you are, the more potential clients tend to trust you, and the more likely they are to not only buy from you but also recommend you to others in their network.

Put simply, while it's worthwhile to keep a healthy limit to time online, it's also vital to remember the role online platforms can play in growing an expert business, especially if the bulk of your products and services are marketed virtually.

With that in mind, this guide focuses on a single and increasingly noteworthy area of expert business online strategy: social media, specifically LinkedIn.

Launched in 2003, LinkedIn is widely considered to be the most "professional" social media platform, and it's marketed as having been designed to "connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful."

Whether or not this is true for every professional on the platform is debatable, but one thing's for certain: If you're an expert – or "thought leader" – running your own business, your LinkedIn presence is a powerful tool in your belt, provided you know how to use it.

That's what this guide is all about. In it, you'll find strategies for optimizing your profile, creating content, and building your network. You'll also find a host of additional resources from within LinkedIn. That way, as you continue to build your LinkedIn footprint, you can do so with confidence and efficiency.

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OPTIMIZING YOUR PROFILE

Before building your presence on LinkedIn, it's important to establish a firm foundation. This comes in the form of optimizing your profile page. Like on other social platforms, your LinkedIn profile is meant to tell viewers enough that they'll either (A) follow your work or (B) connect with you to learn more. It also serves as a digital resume, demonstrating to potential clients or collaborators that you're experienced and trustworthy. Finetune your profile starting with these five steps.

1. ADJUST YOUR PRIVACY SETTINGS WHERE NECESSARY.

First, make sure that your LinkedIn profile is publicly visible. This doesn't allow people to connect with you – that still requires them to send a "Connection Request" from their own account – but it does allow them to view your profile and learn more about you without having to be logged into a LinkedIn account themself.

This is especially useful when selling your products or services, directly and indirectly. In a cold sales email, for example, you can include a link to your LinkedIn profile at the end and mention connecting there. On your website or in your email marketing, you can include links to your social accounts in the footer.

In each of these cases, making your profile easy to access and publicly visible demonstrates your transparency and eagerness to make connections (and, in doing so, provide value for someone even before they've purchased anything from you). As you'd expect, this helps build the trust and credibility you'll need to close sales with these connections later.

Pro Tip: While in settings, take the time to set up a "vanity URL" or, in other words, change your LinkedIn profile URL to something easy to remember. Our CEO's profile, for instance, is

"https://www.linkedin.com/in/taylorrpayne/" so that, knowing that his name is "Taylorr Payne," it's easy to find. Setting up your own vanity URL accomplishes this, too. Plus, it looks neater if you ever want to include it on a business card or in the notes at the end of a presentation.

2. UPDATE YOUR PROFILE PICTURE TO A PROFESSIONAL PHOTO.

Second, after updating your profile settings, update your profile photo. Ideally, this photo should be a professionally shot, up-to-date, headshot-style image of you. This means that it should include your head and shoulders, and in it, you should be dressed professionally and facing forward.

Admittedly, this can seem a bit stifling, and we'll be the first to admit that authenticity isn't to be overlooked when building any public profile.

But on LinkedIn, specifically, the goal is threefold: Be authentic – absolutely – but also be professional and set yourself up for success ("success" meaning a consistently growing professional network through the platform). To meet these goals, a clear and polished headshot is paramount.

Yes, it's not the most exciting, but it gets the job done. You can always let your personality shine through more in your content and in conversations with LinkedIn connections.

Pro Tip: None of this is to say you can't show any personality. Some of the ways in which our clients have balanced personality and professionalism in their profile photos are by wearing clothes, eyewear, or makeup that suit their personality. Another option is through facial expression, posing, or the angle of their body as they face the camera. Keep these in mind as you choose or shoot a LinkedIn photo, and look for creative ways to stay true to yourself while communicating expertise.

Pro Tip #2: When updating your profile photo, update your banner image, too. Your banner – the long, rectangular graphic that spans the area behind your profile photo – should be designed to match your brand but, other than that, can be whatever you want it to be. Need inspiration? Start with these examples. Then, hire a designer, or create your own with design tools like Canva.

3. WRITE YOUR INFO TO SHOWCASE YOUR SKILLS.

After adding profile and banner photos, the third step to optimizing your profile is filling in the details. This starts with your biography or the "About"

section, but it also includes your title, previous work experience, education, and skills. Below are some tips for writing each of these sections.

Headline (Title)

- Showcase what makes your work valuable (i.e. your value proposition).
 Instead of "Owner of Your Name, Inc." a better title would be "Owner of Your Name, Inc. | Consultant & Keynote Speaker | Customer Experience Planning and Analysis".
- Keyword optimize your title. Use words that others in your network or in your ideal audience would likely search for and, ideally, would lead them to you.
- Use words that are relevant to your audience when highlighting your credentials. If you're a marketing expert, for example, including something like "15+ Years SEO, CRO, and Paid Ads Experience" won't be significant to everyone but, for people looking for a marketing expert? Immediate green flag.
- Do not leave your headline section blank, even if you don't know what to say. A bland, placeholder title is better than having nothing there, and you can always change it later.

About (Biography)

- Start with a strong, attention-grabbing opener. This can be a question, a
 powerful statement that prompts further explanation whatever sounds
 most like "you" as long as it prompts curiosity gets the reader to continue
 reading.
- Mention your previous experience including special skills, awards, and certifications. What countries, fields, or jobs have you worked? How many years of experience do you have in your field? What skills make your work valuable, and which awards or certifications have you earned to validate those skills?
- Segue into what you're currently doing. Mention where you currently
 work or what business you run, and briefly touch on your products and
 services. Many people also wrap this section of their bio by mentioning
 "When I'm not at my desk, you can find me doing..." to provide some
 insight into their personal lives and add some approachability.
- End with a call to action and where to learn more about you. Think a link to your website or, if you're comfortable with it, your email address and phone number. You can always edit this section later if you decide to include your contact information initially and take it down

• Let your personality shine through! In your word choices, sentence structure, etc. be yourself. Make jokes, include emoji – be authentic, honest, and open.

Pro Tip: If you're unsure where to start, check out these real examples from LinkedIn members.

Experience

- List your professional experiences in reverse chronological order (or with your most recent explained first).
- Follow the same structure for each experience. Start with a 1-2 sentence overview of the place you worked for, then 1-2 sentences about your primary responsibilities, and then 3-5 bullet points highlighting your key achievements.
- Write for your audience. You don't need to explain your daily responsibilities, but make a point to highlight your primary ones.
 Consider the language you use, as well. Like your title, you can mention skills or responsibilities here that might be meaningless to others but are eye-catching for your focus industry.
- Mention your biggest achievements and the more noteworthy results you produced. These are the most persuasive details you can provide, because they equate your experience to value provided (which makes it appealing to hire or purchase from you).
- Use bullet points or emojis to break up the text. This not only makes this section more readable. It also gives you another chance to show your personality a bit.
- Keep it simple. In most cases, people will be glancing over this section, so the more clean-cut you make it, the more likely they are to actually stop, read it all, and register your expertise.

Education

- List your educational history in reverse chronological order. Don't include anything before higher level education (college or university).
- Fill in as many details as you can. Even if you didn't complete a degree, fill out that you attended higher level education if your studies there were relevant to your professional experience.
- Keep the "Activities" section short and sweet. Like your listings in the "Experience" part of your profile, the more fluff you add, the less likely people are to read it.

• In the "Description" section, mention any honors you received. You may have already mentioned these in your biography above, but reiterating them never hurts.

Skills

- Only include skills that are relevant to your current areas of expertise (i.e.
 the things for which you claim to be an expert now). If you were
 previously a dog groomer but now specialize in marketing, for instance,
 leave the "dog grooming skills" out.
- Include "soft skills" like emotional intelligence, time management, and team collaboration. They're not as immediately eye-catching as some of your other industry-specific skills, but they're equally important.

4. UPLOAD MEDIA – ESPECIALLY VIDEO – TO SUPPORT YOUR EXPERTISE.

The fourth step of optimizing your Linkedin Profile builds on the aforementioned "Experience" section. In this section, not only are you able to list skills that apply to each position you've previously held. You're also able to upload media (video, images, etc.) to provide evidence for those skills. That way, when someone scans your profile, they can see that you've worked in a position that boosts your credibility, AND you have the receipts to prove it.

In addition to the "Experience" section, you can also earn "badges" in the "Skills" section to provide additional evidence of your expertise. These include "Skill assessments" for a wide variety of skills.

There are also options to "Demonstrate transferable skills" like those in sales, marketing, human resources, and project management. You won't earn a badge for these, but positive results will be a part of your profile and can still serve to boost your credibility.

5. CONTINUALLY BUILD YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS.

Fifth and finally, your last LinkedIn profile polishing step is to build your recommendations over time. Under the "Skills" section, recommendations are stored as "endorsements," and you can be endorsed for each of the skills you display on your profile.

By consistently asking for your LinkedIn connections to endorse you for your skills, you build your credibility for each of these skills. Keep these tips in mind when you do so:

- Update your skills as necessary. If some of your skills aren't relevant to your career anymore, remove them from your skills list. Try to keep your list around five skills long.
- Endorse people before asking them to endorse you. This way, you've put in the effort before asking them to do the same for you, making them more likely to return the favor.
- Personalize each of your requests to endorse you. Mention the project(s) you worked on together, and thank them ahead of time for taking the time to help your business in this way.
- Don't wait forever to ask for endorsements. Just like asking for a review for your business, asking for a LinkedIn endorsement is most often carried out when the client still has you and your great work fresh in their memory. Don't miss that opportunity.

CREATING LINKEDIN CONTENT

After refining your profile, the next step to expanding your LinkedIn reach is creating content. Among marketers, one of the most commonly circulated phrases is "content is king," or, in other words, if you want to attract potential clients, the most reliable way to do so is to create and distribute high-value, free content. On LinkedIn, there are a variety of ways to do this, from engaging with other content creators to sharing articles of your own. To kickstart your LinkedIn content strategy, start with the following four steps.

1. POST TO YOUR NETWORK ON A REGULAR BASIS.

First and foremost, post to your LinkedIn profile on a regular basis for two important reasons. The first reason is simple: validity. The more you post, the more engaged your account appears to be, which demonstrates to your followers that you're actively providing value and, thus, worth following.

The second reason to post regularly is for the exposure. Like sales, building your social media presence is, in many ways, a numbers game. More posts equals more opportunities for people to come across one of your posts and decide to follow you. More people following you equals a greater impression of authority, giving even greater reason for people to follow you. Makes sense, right?

Essentially, posting on a regular basis shows that you care about the problems in your focus industry (problems your products/services solve) so much that you (A) are willing to provide value for people affected by those problems before they've given you any money and (B) you don't take "days off". You're not on social media to say, "Look how great I am!" and make a quick buck. You have greater ambitions of addressing real problems for people.

What To Post:

- New blog articles or podcast episodes from your own brand
- Blog articles you wrote for another industry expert or podcast episodes you recently appeared on as a guest

- Articles, videos, podcasts, or other content from other industry experts (ideally content that promotes views or actions you endorse)
- Announcements for upcoming events you're attending or speaking at
- Announcements for free live content such as webinars, workshops, virtual Q&A panels, etc.
- Engagement-focused content for LinkedIn members such as one question multiple-choice polls, "Comment your answer below" questions, and other posts that get your audience to participate in your content

2. COMMENT ON POSTS FROM OTHERS IN YOUR NETWORK.

Beyond posting to your own LinkedIn profile, immerse yourself in the content of others in your network, and actively participate in the conversation. When you come across a post that looks interesting in your LinkedIn feed, leave a comment with further insights or a question, so you can learn more and everyone following the author can keep up with the discussion.

What To Avoid:

- Showing off in the comments. You're there to engage with others and indirectly support the author (even if you're just asking questions). Trying to make yourself look smarter than them or commenting something condescending is always inappropriate.
- Focusing on your own work. If you only comment to say something like, "This is great! It reminds of this article I wrote earlier this year about X, Y, and Z" with a link, you're going to look self-centered and rude.
- Writing "fluffy" comments. Saying, "Wow! Great article!" is nice, but it
 doesn't provide any deeper insight or indicate that you actually
 read/viewed the content itself. It looks like you're commenting for the
 sake of commenting rather than to create a deeper conversation.
- Commenting, then ghosting. If someone replies to your comment, reply to them. If someone shares a comment you have thoughts about, reply to that, too. Keep the conversation going Don't just put your comment, then ignore everyone else.

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What To Do:

- Comment more than you post. The general rule of thumb is to comment on five posts for every one post you share yourself. This plays into LinkedIn's algorithms and helps you expand your network and profile exposure at the same time. Win, win!
- Return comment "favors." If someone comments on your posts regularly, take the time to do the same for their articles. It's a chance to build a deeper professional relationship with them, and it boosts both of your accounts' content.
- Ask questions of the author, and tag them in your comment. Prompt them for more information or for their thoughts on a specific topic within their article. It shows you actually took the time to check out their content and again keeps the conversation moving. That's the goal.
- Build comments into further connections. When you have a great conversation in the comments of an article, reach out to that person directly to ask for more of their thoughts, send a connection request, and follow their own content.

3. CREATE LINKEDIN ARTICLES TO SHARE MORE INFORMATION.

Third, as often as possible, create content that is "value-first" or, in other words, content that provides resources and guidance instead of promoting your products/services. Your followers are looking for posts about what you're working on, but, more than anything else, they want content that helps them in some way.

To this, build some of your posts on LinkedIn articles. If you haven't written one before, a LinkedIn article is similar to a blog post, both in the information it shares and how it's written. Below are seven basic steps to follow as you write your first (or next) one.

Start with a question.

What are some of the challenges people in your focus industry are facing? What guidance do you have for addressing them? How has your job or industry changed since you entered the field? These are just a few questions that can work as starting points when you're considering, "What can I write about that my followers will find valuable?" Check out these suggestions from LinkedIn for additional inspiration.

Focus on a keyword or phrase.

Based on the question(s) you chose, narrow down a keyword or phrase on which you'll focus your article. This is important from a Search Engine Optimization (SEO) standpoint (what makes your article easy to find in a Google search), but it also makes it clear what your article is about. Once you've chosen a keyword or phrase, use it in the article title, any applicable subheadings, and throughout the body text.

Write in a positive, active tone.

Even if you're writing about a tough or touchy subject, try to keep your tone light and action-oriented. When you mention a problem, follow it up with "So, how do we fix this?" When you point out a flaw in someone's actions, mention what they did well. If you stop at the problem OR write a negative article, you're going to depress people and they're less likely to continue reading and following you. But, if you focus on positive, actionable things, it'll strengthen your arguments and empower readers to act.

Write with readability in mind.

Text-heavy articles can be a lot for people to digest, but you can make it easier by following basic readability guidelines. These include keeping sentences below 20 words, paragraphs below 150 words, and sections below 300 words. It's also important to avoid passive voice ("Bob wrote a book" instead of "The book was written by Bob," for example). I know, I know – it sounds nit-picky – but it always pays off.

Include a cover image.

When it's finished, upload a cover image to your LinkedIn article. It can be a stock image or custom graphic – whatever suits your brand – but it should relate to the title. You can find guidelines for how large a cover image should be and how to upload it in this LinkedIn support guide.

Include media throughout the article.

Break up the text in your article with graphics, images, embedded videos, or other media. These not only provide readers with visual aids to make your content more memorable. They also make it more engaging and easier to digest, as they give readers periodic breaks from reading.

Share it to your LinkedIn profile.

Once your LinkedIn article is finished and ready to share, publish it to your LinkedIn profile. LinkedIn will automatically ask you if you want to create a post when you publish it (hint: yes, you do), but consider also adding it to the "Featured" section of your profile. That way, when someone lands on your page, they'll immediately see all the valuable content you recently wrote for others like them.

4. BALANCE PROFESSIONALISM WITH PERSONALITY.

Lastly, in all of your comments, posts – anything you share on LinkedIn – don't forget to be yourself. It's important to be professional, but it's also vital that you be authentic. If you're putting on a "professional" persona, your followers will be able to tell, to some degree, that you're not passionate about the content you share and, by extension, you're not being 100% honest with them. This makes them less engaged and makes potential followers less likely to connect with you.

To avoid this, balance professionalism with the core tenants of your personality. For example, on our own team, our CEO is known as a "no bullsh*t," always authentic, unafraid of disagreement kind of guy. Because of this, his LinkedIn posts often include profanity, considering that's quite literally the way he speaks in-person.

That said, none of his posts are riddled with profanity, and not every post includes it at all. Instead, profane words are carefully placed and included only when they're needed to provide impact or when they fit the situation (like the phrase "get sh*t done" for instance).

In the same way, your profile should balance the shiny, perfect, professional things about you with the messier, more realistic things. Sure, you shouldn't act the same on LinkedIn as you might with a group of friends on a night out, but you also don't have to be prim and proper. Find the middle ground, and adjust accordingly as you receive feedback.

MAKING CONNECTIONS ON LINKEDIN

Beyond polishing your profile and creating content, the ultimate goal on LinkedIn is to grow your network. After all, the more people following and engaging with you, the more authoritative your profile appears and the broader your online reputation (at least in a professional sense). Making connections on LinkedIn largely comes down to persistence and patience, but the four steps below are also proven to help you hit the ground running.

1. PERSONALIZE EVERY CONNECTION REQUEST.

For starters, take the time to personalize every connection request you send. A boilerplate, copied-and-pasted connection request isn't going to fool anyone and, frankly, suggests that they weren't even worth a personal message. Who wants to respond to that? No one.

Instead, write connection requests with details distinct to the people receiving them. Consider mentioning an article they just published, an event you just saw them at, a video or podcast you just saw them on – you get the idea – and include details beyond "I just saw you published this, and it was great."

Think like you're writing a comment, and be specific. What about their article did you find interesting? What comment from their podcast did you have follow up questions about? Are there ways they could collaborate on a blog/LinkedIn article/video/podcast with you to further share their ideas?

Go beyond the standard "I'd like to connect" message, and share WHY you want to connect. Be personal, humble, and show investment beyond increasing the number of connections you have. Then, they'll connect with you.

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2. USE LINKEDIN TO FOLLOW UP AFTER IN-PERSON NETWORKING EVENTS.

Additionally, speaking of connection requests, make sure to send them after networking events. Now more than ever, business takes place online just as much as it does in person (if not more, depending on your focus industry). That means, if you connect with 100 people in person, you're wasting those connections if you don't also follow up with them online.

In the context of LinkedIn, this means checking out the content shared by those people, sending them personalized connection requests, or – if you worked closely with them during an event – offering to endorse their skills on LinkedIn as a bonus.

It also means consistently working to engage with their content and build your professional relationships with them over time. Leading up to the next event, for instance, use LinkedIn to send them a direct message and ask if they'll be there or if they're presenting. During the next event, use LinkedIn to follow up with people you meet and ask if they have time, while you're both in the same city, to meet for coffee and further conversation.

However you approach a deeper connection with people you met in person, keep LinkedIn as a tool in your back pocket.

3. SEARCH WITHIN LINKEDIN TO FIND POSSIBLE CONNECTIONS.

Besides live events, you can also broaden your LinkedIn network by searching within the platform for possible connections. This functionality – also called "People Search" – is a quick and easy way to look for potential connections within your focus industry while narrowing them down by additional factors (location, working for a specific company, etc.)

With "People Search," there are a handful of ways to conduct searches like this, some more technical than others. These are five of the most common ones:

- Advanced Search: Enter keywords for the fields you want to specify, such as title, company, location, former position, etc.
- "OR" Boolean Search: Search for one or more terms in someone's profile, such as "CEO OR Chief Executive Officer" in the title.

- "AND" Boolean Search: Search for a series of terms in someone's profile, all of which should be included, such as "Marketing AND Officer" in the title.
- "NOT: Boolean Search: Run a Boolean OR or AND search and filter out some of the results (Think "CEO OR Chief Executive Officer AND NOT Owner").
- **Search Result Sorting:** Sort people by the factor that's most relevant, such as what "degree connection" they are to you.

To learn more about running each of these searches, check out this guide from LinkedIn's blog.

4. CONSIDER JOINING A LINKEDIN GROUP.

Last but not least, if you want to expand your network on LinkedIn, try joining a LinkedIn Group. Like groups on other social platforms, LinkedIn Groups are closed, digital communities in which members can share content, ask questions, or otherwise engage with others who have similar interests.

As LinkedIn puts it, "LinkedIn Groups provide a place for professionals in the same industry or with similar interests to share their insights and experiences, ask for guidance, and build valuable connections." In other words, if you want to find other people like you, looking for connections like you, Groups are a fantastic place to start.

To find active Groups, you simply have to search with the bar at the top of your homepage. As you build your LinkedIn following, you might also consider creating your own Group. That way, you can better control the content shared in it, moderate members to ensure positive participation and respect, and further direct the reasons for and benefits of the Group in the first place.

You can learn more about finding, joining, and creating LinkedIn Groups in this membership overview guide.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, building your LinkedIn presence comes with a long list of benefits, from building partnerships with other industry professionals to providing value for – and marketing to – potential future clients.

There's also the added bonus of LinkedIn's size. Put simply, investing in your LinkedIn footprint means that all the content you might otherwise just share on your website, all the insights that would be confined to people on your email list are instead in front of thousands of other people.

Even if you only reach a tiny percentage of the platform's 875 million members, that's still countless opportunities you have to share your message, make a good impression, and maybe even make some sales, all because you regularly take the time to be present and share content on LinkedIn that you're likely already creating elsewhere anyway. What's not to love about that, right?

Long story short, building up a LinkedIn following takes time and dedication, but the return on investment is there if you're willing to put in the work. Hopefully, this guide helps you start that work knowing that you're heading in the right direction.

For more information about improving your LinkedIn profile and establishing a strategy for your social content, check out the resources on the following page and, as always, visit our Resources page for more free guides like this.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- "20 Steps To A Better LinkedIn Profile" from Jane Deehan on LinkedIn
- "16 Tips To Optimize Your LinkedIn Profile And Your Personal Brand" from Lisa Dougherty on LinkedIn
- "How To Create Content For LinkedIn That Appeals To Your Audience" from Karen Tisdell on LinkedIn
- "15 Inspiring Content Ideas For Your LinkedIn Page" from Tequia Burt on LinkedIn
- "10 Tips To Maximize Your LinkedIn Profile And Grow Your Network" from Abdullah Abdul Kader onLinkedIn

THE THOUGHT LEADER'S

MUST-KNOW LINKEDIN TIPS

- Set up your privacy settings for success. Your profile picture and general information (bio, position, etc) should be public, and your connections list should be private.
- Use a professional profile picture. As skilled as you may be in taking selfies, nothing beats a photographer's understanding of lighting, angles, and body position.
- Use an engaging headline, something that immediately lets the other person know what you do and how you can add value to their team/organization/company.
- Attach media, especially video (video testimonials are ideal). We live in a world where a photo doesn't necessarily equal authenticity, but videos are still widely trusted.
- Recommendations are key. You can sweet-talk about yourself 'till you're blue in the face, but a third-party validation of your skills and talents can be the deciding factor to seal the deal.
- Fill out as much information as possible when it comes to education and experience. Titles and years aren't enough People want a story.
- Take advantage of LinkedIn's Social Selling Index. These are key performance indicators as to whether or not you're maximizing LinkedIn's algorithms.
- Post regularly, and focus on driving engagement. Less than 1% of LinkedIn users post weekly, so doing this greatly impacts your ability to reach people organically.
- Take note of **when** you're on LinkedIn. Its algorithms will boost your posts/comments from later in the day (after 4 pm or so) all the way into the next day.

THE THOUGHT LEADER'S

LINKEDIN CHECKLIST

PROFILE OPTIMIZATION

Add a professional profile picture
Create an engaging headline
Create an interesting bio with a story
Attach relevant media
Build out your experience section
BEING SOCIAL
Develop a documented daily routine
Like/comment on 5-10 posts/day
Post weekly (ideally an article w/post)
Find and engage new/trending content
Join Relevant LinkedIn groups
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS
Document value offerings that can be given to LinkedIn
Connections
Send each new connection a personalized LinkedIn message
Ask the last few people who engaged with you for endorsements
(and endorse them

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Questions or Comments?

Contact us at hello@speakerflow.com and let us know what you think!

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