

Hook up with clients online

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Chances are you haven't heard of butN, Coffee or Networkr. But only a short time ago no one had heard of Tinder. Now, it's dominating online dating. It's likely one of the aforementioned online business networking apps will take off in a big way this year, thanks to how easily they match businesspeople, clients and contractors.

"Tinder was certainly an inspiration," admits London-based Networkr co-founder and chief executive Tim Groot. "Obviously, Tinder has a more specific focus on romance, where Networkr can be used for a variety of things such as finding clients, staff or fellow business owners. It's our mission to make it possible for all professionals in the world to connect with each other with a single swipe on their mobile phone screen."

While all have their own distinctive niches, Networkr, Coffee and butN are competing to become the Tinder of business networking. Developed by the Europe-based Federation of International Employers, butN is aimed at business travellers keen to catch up with other businesspeople – either locals or fellow travellers – based nearby (as with Tinder, profiles of those in close proximity are displayed). Coffee was started after its founder had a Tinder conversation with a New York-based investment banker who was frustrated no existing online social or business networks allowed her to easily connect with other high-flying professionals and find out about employment opportunities at up-and-coming companies.

"New entrants such as Coffee or established businesses such as LinkedIn are all in the 'professional discovery' market but serve different purposes, as do the profession-specific online networks such as Doximity for healthcare professionals or Dribbble for designers," argues Groot. "My vision for Networkr is that it will make activities such as lead generation more efficient. Instead of spending a couple of days writing and sending LinkedIn emails to 100 potential clients, you can spend an hour swiping through profiles of businesses and match with the ones that are interested in what you offer."

While the new online business networking tools show promise, it's not clear which will come to rival Facebook and which will share the fate of Myspace. Certainly, all have a long way to travel to reach the kind of mass take-up tipping point their more established competitors enjoyed.

"I'd draw a parallel between Facebook and apps such as Tinder and LinkedIn and apps such as Networkr," says Groot. "Facebook and LinkedIn are about staying in touch with your existing network and they've blazed a trail for 'discovery' apps that are about meeting new people."

A straw poll of Australian business owners found some early adopters had created profiles on the new networking services but most had an ongoing preference for established online players such as LinkedIn and Meetup.com and old-school offline networking.

"I signed up to Coffee, Networkr and butN at the beginning of the year," says Brisbane-based Nathan Schokker, owner of facilities management company Talio. "I like the Tinder-style swiping system and the potential to quickly arrange coffee catch-ups but there are so few Australian members at present that I haven't got a lot out of any of them yet, apart from a few online conversations."

"I discovered Coffee on a friend's phone in late 2014 and have since used it to connect with a few start-up business owners as well as look for a videographer," says Stella Bella, the woman behind "social walking food tour" Sydney Grub Crawl.

"I like Coffee and I'd be open to using tools such as butN and Networkr but they're nowhere near being as significant to me as Meetup.com [a social



Stella Bella from Sydney Grub Crawl finds business apps useful. *Photo: Supplied*



Tim Groot used Tinder as inspiration. *Photo: Supplied*

networking portal that facilitates offline group meetings]. I've used that very successfully for years to grow both my social and business networks. In fact, what's now Sydney Grub Crawl actually grew out of a Meetup group I created."

It may be that the Tinder of business networking is yet to be invented, as even Groot concedes. "There's still an expectation that online networking will lead to an offline meeting but I'm not sure if that will continue to be the case once virtual reality takes off," says Groot. "In the shorter term I suspect industry-specific online business networks is where a lot of the action will be."

"I'm a big advocate of the efficiency of networking online but it still has drawbacks, such as the gap between how an individual presents online and the real world reality, as well as the risk of receiving an endless barrage of emails if you connect with the wrong person," notes Bella. "It's the online business network that addresses those kinds of basic issues that has best chance of becoming the next Tinder."

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