Are you one of the more than 150 million members in 200 countries who is part of the LinkedIn professional network? And what about Facebook, which boasts 955 million active accounts in its social network?

When people join these digital networks, they are promised benefits that sound a lot like those provided by many professional associations, including STLE. LinkedIn, for example, tells users they can use the network to “manage your professional identity, build and engage your professional network and access knowledge, insights and opportunities.”

The point of departure from groups like STLE is that basic membership in LinkedIn is free. STLE’s annual membership fee for individuals is $135. Why would anyone pay money for something they can get for free?

Before we attack that question, let me stress that I am among the more than 150 million LinkedIn participants and find it useful. In addition, STLE has a LinkedIn group that has attracted more than 2,000 participants and hosts some lively technical discussions.

But there is a huge difference between the value proposition of a professional society and the role of a business or social network. A professional society can set the standards and establish a body of knowledge that governs and defines a profession. Groups like LinkedIn maintain a few rules of etiquette, but the criteria for participation are loose and undefined.

Anyone who applies to become a full member of STLE must have an engineering or science degree, or have substantial practical experience in the field of tribology and lubricants. Once they become a member, the individual must follow a code of professional conduct and comply with more focused standards such as the prohibition on commercial content in conference presentations or journal papers.

STLE’s three certification committees take responsibility for defining and updating the body of knowledge for various industry segments. Through their work, STLE establishes minimum standards of what people need to know if they want to call themselves a lubricant professional.

As a result of these efforts, companies and individuals that maintain STLE membership are recognized as the world's leading experts on lubricants, applied lubrication practices and tribology research.

I suspect this is why you see so many of our members wearing their STLE lapel logo or their certification pin at industry events, and it is why they put logos on their business cards. When was the last time you saw someone wearing a LinkedIn lapel pin?

Not coincidentally, STLE’s Chicago-based headquarters office recently distributed membership service pins to 415 individuals around the world. The pins are issued in five-year increments. This year’s class of pin recipients represents 6,360 combined years of membership in STLE—that’s a lot of technical knowledge and experience. In that sense, members return the favor by enhancing STLE’s reputation as the unqualified source of technical information relating to lubrication engineering and tribology research.

STLE's leadership and staff recognize that we need to provide relevant value in a rapidly changing business world. But we will continue to match that with a commitment to maintain standards that enable companies and individuals to make STLE membership a valuable point of distinction and differentiation.

Professional societies like STLE are committed to maintaining standards that enable companies and individuals to make their membership a valuable point of distinction and differentiation.

Sources: STLE's LinkedIn Group, LinkedIn Help Center, STLE's Certification Program.

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