

## An Interview With Kyle Ford, Director, Product Marketing, Ning

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book ever written on the subject of Social Media.

Today we are here with Kyle Ford, Director of Product Marketing for *Ning*, the social network platform that you can build yourself. And we will be speaking today about Social Media, of course, and Social Networks, and especially *Ning*.



So, Kyle, hey cool. It is great to have you here today.

**KF:** It's great to be here, thank you.

**LS:** Awesome! So let's get started. Kyle, could you start out by telling the listeners a little bit about yourself and your background?

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**KF:** Sure. I have been at *Ning* since December of 2005, so very close to the beginning. *Ning* launched publically in October, 2005, so I came on board a few months after launch. I was one of the first two Product Managers. Before that, I was at *Yahoo! T.V. Movies*. I am actually based in Los Angeles so I came here because I have an entertainment background and I was acting in movies for about a year and a half. And before that for several years, I was at *Fox Broadcasting Company* doing many of the *Primetime* show's television sites.

**LS:** Alright.

**KF:** And then I got into that, and that kind of stuff.

**LS:** Well, that is great. You were working with websites and for the multimedia for...

**KF:** That's correct. That's correct.

**LS:** Well, that's cool! Okay, so you understand a lot about building trusted networks?

**KF:** Absolutely!

**LS:** Can you explain to our listeners (just in case they have never heard of *Ning*) what *Ning* is exactly?

**KF:** Yes. So *Ning* is (in the shortest way to describe it) basically your own Social Network for anything. So without being any sort of a computer-nerd and not having done any programming, you can go to *Ning.com* and in a matter of a couple of minutes create your own Social Networks. By that, I do not mean pages on a *MySpace* or a *FaceBook*, but literally your own *FaceBook* or *MySpace* in its entirety. So you can use it for sports teams, church, families, if you have an interest in being a brand, if you have a band. Any use you can think of for a Social Network, you can have it up and running in just a matter of minutes. You can just use "drag-and-drop" to add features, and pick a style and you are ready to go.

We host it and deal with all the fairly scary stuff like security and scary things like that, so all you will need to

worry about is bringing your ideas to the table and you can go from there. And the best part is that it is free. And you can extend it a little bit more with some things you may want to insert, but by default it is actually comparable with *Google's AdSense* ads that are free to the end-user.

**LS:** I love that, and that is one of the things that are really exciting about Social Media. You hear so many of the incredible technologies that are available to the users 100% free in one or two ways. Either they are advertising-supported or they are “Freemium’s,” meaning, of course, you can get the basic service free, or you can just pay for the higher level.

Okay, so let me get this right. I am going to use the “F”-word here; “*FaceBook*”. (Laughter)

**KF:** Yep!

**LS:** You can actually create something like your very own *FaceBook* for your group, your friends, your colleagues; people who have similar interests?

**KF:** That’s correct! Yep! So we certainly have nothing against *FaceBook*, I use *Facebook* all the time. But when I have an organization or some sort of property that I want to “blow out” Social Media-wise, *FaceBook* groups can be fairly limiting. There are only a certain amount of things that you can do. We will see many people that will have a fairly successful online presence on *FaceBook* or a group on a *MySpace*-page. But when they actually create their own online identities they will come to us and we say, “Yes, you can add photo-sharing, your calendars, your music; any kind of ingredient you want to scoop on your tray, you can do that.”

And then, of course, we have (sort of) tentacles going back to the other sites, too. You can also, then, go back to where you started and you can promote your Social Network on *FaceBook* or *MySpace* through us with different embeddables. So certainly there are people who will want to be everywhere, but we have made everything centralized on your own network. If you use one of our Premium Services, you could be on your own domain, too. So you are completely in your own hands and from there you can extend out to other Social Media properties to spread your word.

**LS:** So your business model actually is based on “Freemium”. You can get all of these incredible tools for free and you can also upgrade to your own domain; it is just a small fee.

**KF:** Yes. So what we have is full functionality, free for everyone. The only things we charge for, which are our Premium Services are: 1. Five bucks a month to actually create your own domain name. So you get rid of the “your-name.com to your-domain.com.

And then for \$20 a month you can strip out our Google Ads altogether and buy out your site’s full inventory and run as many ads that you want to do. So there is not anything extra, it is literally just \$20 and you can do what ever you want, ad-wise.

Then we have another service which is currently \$8 a month, which is us removing any powered-by-name branding so you do not have any of this, “Bob created this network on me.” So you can just take it out and completely have it be your own world. So, altogether for \$32 a month you can have your own piece of the Social Network, which you own.

**LS:** To me that is totally amazing that you can get your own *MySpace*-type platform for \$5, \$8, \$20 a month.

**KF:** Yes, and one of the cool things about it, too, is on top of how relatively inexpensive it is to do that; we are also constantly rolling in new features every two to three weeks. So if you want a certain feature, the odds are that it will come out in the next wave, as long as you are on what we call our Centralized Code, which is what most people are. As soon as we push out new updates, you automatically will get these new features as well.

And to mention Centralized Code, we also have what separates us even a little bit more from some other sites. If you are a developer and you want to go completely independent and actually change the source code of your network, we give out the source code for the entire PHP side of the product, which are the Social Network products.

So if you request this and you are a developer, you can actually jump off the “automatic-update” train and completely change your Code so you can...essentially we are giving you your own network and you can do whatever you want to do with it.

**LS:** So the technology is also completely “across-the-board”. It can be everything from “drag-and-drop” for the novice, right down to the PHP programmer.

**KF:** Exactly! We try to do “Grandma’s Sewing Circle” to anything that might compliment it. The designer who is comfortable with the widest amount of steps can go in and use this stuff and still be “specialized.” And like you said, the PHP experts can go in and if they want to decentralize it, they can do whatever they want.

**LS:** Geez. And the other thing that I am hearing is that, of course *The Social Media Bible* is all about Social Media. And, of course, trusted networks and Social Networks are all about Social Media. However, I am also hearing that you can add, or anybody can add, almost any Social Media tools, video, podcasts, or anything!

**KF:** Yeah, so the built-in features we have (and I think we have up to 10 of each on the homepage and currently one of each on the Member Profile pages) are Free-Form Podcasts. These are Podcasts that can accept a feed from anywhere and pull in podcasts from elsewhere, and also Free HTML, so you can use it to add text or content into it.

If you are a beginner and you do not know HTML, you can drop HTML or you can drop in embeddables from elsewhere. And then we are about two weeks away from,(very close to where we are going to be) rolling out full support for *OpenSocial*, which is *Google’s* open-application program; where supported sites (what they call “containers”) enable *OpenSocial* applications to run on them. So there will be a whole host of third-party “apps” that you will be able to add to your Social Network.

So if we offer something, the odds are that you will be able to browse our *OpenSocial* gallery and with just one click, add that view to your page and that will add film quality to your functionality, and what not.

**LS:** And that’s really exciting, too. I did get a chance to actually interview Kevin Marks who is running the *OpenSocial* over at *Google*, and he did an incredible interview. I cannot believe and I am actually really shocked and surprised, pleasantly so, that *OpenSocial* is...you people are going to launch it already!

**KF:** Yes, when we were approached and asked about this late last year, we supported it and in a very “alpha” fashion. And it sat there for awhile and was stagnant, frankly. So what we are trying to do is; we are up against our very recent specs and doing some real deep integration that will be very simple for our members to add into their own pages. So, yes, we are pretty excited. It is going to be very innovative part of *Ning*. The current release date for that is the 22<sup>nd</sup>, so that’s coming up very soon.

**LS:** Wow, that’s incredible! From our listeners perspective (if you have not heard Kevin Marks’ interview on *OpenSocial*) having this capability built into *Ning* is really incredible. So listen to that podcast and you will understand. And my hat is off to you for actually incorporating this into your technology so fast.

**KF:** Yeah, it is going to be fantastic! *OpenSocial* is, right now, essentially limited to profile pages on the network because in most services like *MySpace* or *Hi5*...you, as the member, only control your profile page. But we are a little different in that if you were the creator of the network, you also have access to the main page, too. So you have access to the full Social Networks and we are working to (apparently soon) have a search engine from profile pages also to the main page of the networks. So at that point, it becomes a feature on top of our standard features, which should be very exciting.

**LS:** Boy, that’s incredible to have that kind of technology under the hood. And the thing that is really exciting is that is it “drag-and-drop”.

**KF:** Absolutely!

**LS:** That’s cool! Can you give me an idea of a profile of who is actually using *Ning*? What are they using it for? What types of people are involved?

**KF:** I think we are very interesting in that we are all over the board. Our demographics are everywhere. We do have some older users, which are unlike those from something like a *MySpace* in which users are fairly young. We do have many Social Networks with people who have created company intra-nets, or like I have said, church groups or family groups.

We do have people that have come from the *MySpace* and *FaceBook* world, but we also have people who are completely new to Social Networking. Now that they see a reason to be included in a Social Network (if before they just want to connect with friends or with their kids soccer team) they might be more apt to use it. So we see people from small groups doing stuff, all the way up to huge recording artists.

Like we have 50 Cent using us! And many big bands that set up their Social Networking presence with us. Really, I guess the short answer is that it is all over the place and that is exciting to us. Every day we see Social Networks for some niche groups we would never have imagined.

Currently we are adding about 2,000 new networks a day so it is growing very quickly. We just [11:30.0] across 450,000 networks that are running on the platform now. So it has been growing extremely fast.

**LS:** You actually have almost 500,000 networks already!

**KF:** Yes. We are almost there, and by the end of September, we should hit that.

**LS:** Oh my gosh! So the thing again, that I am hearing that is exciting, is that your demographic pretty much is identical to the demographic of Social Media, which really includes the entire world.

**KF:** Exactly, our CEO at Ning said she always envisioned millions of Social Networks. Eventually everyone could have their own Social Network. One of the things we worked through, honestly, is that if people get their Social Networking for free why would they sign up for one more network? Since they are all tied together with the *Ning* ID and the email login that we have, so you can join one or you can join all of them without having to sign up again. We certainly see the value of having different personae in different scenarios. As you do in real life, you may want to share different media with your soccer team than you do with your 50Cent fan base, than you do with your church groups, and so we allow you to be a member of all the different communities; but at the end of day they are sharing the same login. So it is convenient for the users.

**LS:** That is convenient. So, basically I can set limits to, or levels to which personal information is shared with each of the....

**KF:** Yeah, yeah. So when you sign on you have a base profile that goes across all of them grouped by sex, location, etc.; you can omit things if you want privacy. But within each network, you have your own set of profile questions, so you have different photos and impressions and persona on different networks, but they are all sharing the same system.

**LS:** That is really powerful! And we are using *Ning*. One of the companies that I recently founded is *World Webinar Network* and we set it up on *Ning*, and it is absolutely incredible how many people go to it, and all we have to do is just drive them there. And we are building social communities. We are getting emails, we are getting people signed up, and it is leading to the people who are part of the *Ning* network asking us to join their other networks such as *FaceBook* and *MySpace* and *LinkedIn*. At first I thought you might have been somewhat competing with these other ones, but it seems like you really have your own unique, broader niche.

**KF:** Yeah, we do. We are counterpoint/complimentary to each of them now. Signing up on one of those networks combines with joining our world, and that is great. Using *Ning* is essentially creating your own world. We certainly have lots of viral tools going in and out to different services; and you can pull in all your photos from *Flickr* with just a couple of clicks in *Ning*, and we can create *SpaceBook* apps from your *Ning* media players, like *NewsBreak*.

With a couple of clicks, it can be added onto your page and, like I said, all sorts of content and embeddables put on *MySpace*. We are all about spreading your brand around and maintaining your brand in one place, and exporting it all over.

**LS:** I like what you said about spreading the brand; because in business, in particularly myself, I have my own brand and it is really difficult without *OpenSocial* and having all of these independent different types of networks set up. But really *Ning* does let me create the foundation for my brand. That's an incredible tool! That's really neat.

**KF:** Exactly!

**LS:** If someone actually wanted to get started using *Ning* (we just heard it is not an expensive process) but is it difficult to log on, create an account, and add to it?

**KF:** No, my goal was that my grandmother could do it (who could barely turn a computer on) and could do it in a minute or less. And so, yes, if you go to *Ning.com* there are just a couple of sign-up fields and then you type in your network and hit “launch” and you are set. It is about as easy as it can get.

**LS:** Wow! And another question that continuously comes up (mostly from people who do not understand the term “Social Media” or “Social Networking”) are concerns; if my teenage daughter is going to go on there and create a *Ning* account is there anything she should be careful of, anything I should be careful of, or even as a business person is there any cautions or things to watch out for?

**KF:** Yeah, I think Social Networking can be demonized a lot. Certainly when you hear the *MySpace* horror stories of creeps posting photos of themselves that they should not be doing. I think *Ning* is different because you are not necessarily joining *Ning*, you are typically joining a [16; 00.0] of *Ning* so the audience for someone like 50 Cent is going to be different than something on the tamer side.

Within there are certainly quite a few problems to control, so if you wanted to create a safe network for your family, you can certainly do so and you can make it private so it can only be accessed by invitation. You can moderate photos and videos before they appear, you can ban someone from a public network who is being troublesome. There are all sorts of controls that you have. I think *Ning* is interesting in that it can very often serve, if it’s someone’s first website, experience and serve in other ways to train people as to what appropriate behavior is in a Social Media context.

Therefore, if they start and want a free and friendly space, they are much more apt to learn the technology and they may branch out from there. However, I think that in a Wild West scenario, which *MySpace* is often portrayed as, anything goes and it certainly can be scary. I certainly advocate for people that are new to it to join a private network or a safe network just to get their bearings as to what’s going on.

**LS:** I glad to hear you use the term “safe network”, and one of the things that (after interviewing people and in my own personal experience with Social Media) I am hearing is that Social Media people who participate in “trusted networks” police themselves. They keep people doing the right thing.

**KF:** Absolutely! *Wikipedia* is a great example of that. You see someone deface someone’s *Wikipedia* page and a whole host of people will spring into action. And sometimes the way it gets resolved is by that self-healing phenomenon.

**LS:** That is interesting. Amanda Vega, (who is an expert at *Comment Marketing*), told me the morning that I interviewed her that she was on *LinkedIn* and somebody blew out an email to everybody saying, “Hey, I do consulting, I’m available to speak for your company, here’s my web address, let me know how you can hire me.” And I think the term that she used is that she got “totally flamed”.

**KF:** (Laughter) Yeah, yeah!

**LS:** An it is kind of cool, also, to hear that you create safe networks. You can do them by invitation only. A lot of the safety...

**KF:** ...yeah. We have not recently done this but initially when we were still trying to get people onto being a

network, many people are members of these larger networks but they have never been a network creator, per se. The exchange of blog posts (or any blog which is creating Social Networks) is like throwing a party. And what do you do with rowdy guests? Throw them out. And that is the basics of maintaining one day-to-day. It can be an interesting challenge but it is still rewarding if you get a thriving community up and running.

**LS:** Well, yeah! What did *FaceBook* sell 10% of its network for? \$1.6 billion!

**KF:** (Laughter) Yeah, exactly!

**LS:** Hey, I 'm in it and we can work to that point. I love that! Along that line, can you think of anybody who is using *Ning*, like a business or a small entrepreneurial-type person that has a success story that you might be able to share with our listeners?

**KF:** Sure, we have seen quite a few...I'm trying to think of a small example; I do not think we have a small example out there. I can certainly find you some but we have seen some large companies do some interesting things. A great example of that is Saturn, the car company. They have a pretty rabid fan base for their cars, so they created a line for Saturn using *Ning*. Just for the aficionados of Saturn cars to connect with each other to see what has been happening without a time-based interruption. Fuji Film has a new camera they launched and they just did a Social Network around the camera that eventually will be tied into everything.

We also saw, of all things, a WD-40 Social Network.

**LS:** Really!

**KF:** Yes, it shows you the range and lengths people will go to when they are creating something. A lot of interesting stuff is being done with brands. As I mentioned, we certainly see a lot of success with bands, both large and small. That's kind of a natural because it is a...a... if you have an interesting brand, it might have a different fan-base. Many of these people have been collecting emails over the years and they have mailing lists. So this is like the next step to where they will create a Social Network. They will send out their emails and invite them all in, and their fans will share and record videos and have photos of them, so you can have a pretty interesting video experience.

And then they will be apt to become even bigger fans because they are talking and interacting directly with fan members, and stuff like that. Along those lines, we just rolled out...as I have said we roll all these features out... and we just rolled out LiveChat, and that's been a big hit.

**LS:** Oh really! You actually have live *LiveChat* built right into it.

**KF:** Yep, so if you go to our "features" page and just drag it in and you will have it. So it's pretty cool.

**LS:** Oh my gosh! And you know, you are right. I never thought about it but musical bands; I mean, God, that's should be like a "Primary Demographic"...

**KF:** See, and that kind of world was *MySpace*'s bread and butter for the people linking *MySpace* pages. You know, they got their start with getting their brand –interest. Now we are showing many brands and they are getting a little bit savvy and saying, "Well, I don't want *MySpace.com/mybrand*'s URL with *MySpace* keeping

all the ad revenue if my site's successful. How can I take that to the next level?" And so, we see a lot of people come to us.

**LS:** And that's a really good point, too. You're not trying to be greedy or selfish here. You are helping the people who have a limited budget and, at any time, they can inexpensively buy their way up through, so that they actually have 100% of their own community.

**KF:** Yep, exactly!

**LS:** I mean Fortune 500 companies...Jeep, Saturn, Fuji, and WD 40! How sleek is that! Of course, I think you used the word "rapid" fans for Saturn.

**KF:** Yep!

**LS:** That is absolutely true; they do have a real trusted network, a real following.

**KF:** Sure, and I think it speaks to how really difficult it is to create something like this from scratch. I mean, you are talking here about 100,000's of dollars, if not millions because they are setting up a static website. There are quite a few components, obviously, in terms of doing all these things. They can show your activity, they can show your skill, they can show you are secure. They can accept videos and code them in. So there are many very scary things involved. So even to people with the skills and those with absolutely different styles, we are still very popular because it is a lot cheaper and they can turn it around so quickly.

A great example of that is (and this was prior to our most recent products, though we did have [23:10.9] which is a little more rudimentary, but it was leading up to our existing products) when we had a lot of television shows use us to create web applications very quickly. In the world of network communities, you never know if the show is going to be around for more than two weeks. So they will create a compelling web property and if it succeeds, great; they spent \$30, and if it fails, they spent \$30!

**LS:** I like that idea, too. You are absolutely right! Hollywood is kind of "hit and miss". I just saw the T.V. show, or the T.V. set the other night which was a movie about...

**KF:** ...yeah, a pilot....David Ducuvney is in it, I think.

**LS:** Yeah, exactly! And I was thinking, "Oh my God, that is definitely an industry that I don't think I want to play in." And *Ning* would be, like, "off the charts" for something like Hollywood doing T.V. or movies or pilots; or even just movie launches.

**KF:** That is definitely something that even I am in now, and the little guy now is, also. So we get a preview of a lot of movies prior to launch.

**LS:** Wow, wow! Great product! So to summarize, is there anything else that you can think of. I'm even embarrassed to ask this question, but it was a subject that you talked about.

**KF:** Sure!

**LS:** Anything else that you can tell our listeners about *Ning*?

**KF:** Yeah. I think that in general the product will speak for itself. I think the best experience is to go there and create one; and invite your friends in and try to build your space. I think it is pretty exciting to use.

I think in terms of things that are on the horizon, like I said, *OpenSocial* joining in is a huge extra for us. Also next Tuesday we are releasing an *iPhone Interspace* through all the networks and we are putting them on across all the ½ million networks. They will get a custom *iPhone* number that inherits their colors and styles of their main network; so it will be like releasing half a million *iPhone*'s...actually at launch it will be the first "toe in the water" towards the mobile strategy. The *iPhone* is kind of the sexiest right now, which is why we started with that.

However, it is hard to say that we will not extend that to others going forward; and obviously mobile Social Networking is going to become more and more compelling, especially when we start seeing it in the next few years tapping into things like location-based stuff.

You know, if you have a network of friends and they are going to a location, you might want to see on a map where people are at a given moment; and all sorts of interesting things you can do with the technology. So that's something we are studying down the path for and we are actually keeping our eye on. We are starting new this week and hopefully go on from there.

But, yeah, I think you will definitely see another thing we will be working on and that will be ways to effectively manage the fact that you may belong to 20 or 25 main networks.

Right now, most people belong to a handful, but as they are becoming so popular, we think we should be finding a product that has an interest in becoming more and more able to meet these demands. We are going to be able to go back and see what is going on with this new stuff. There will be some solutions along those lines to make it easier, in terms of belonging to more and more networks, and making it convenient to do so.

**LS:** That's really cool. One quick question; do you have a widget for Twitter?

**KF:** We do not yet have a widget but certainly, you can put yours in our access box.

**LS:** Uh ha.

**KF:** People do that all the time. But, yeah, we hope to see it and we may help build it ourselves as it ends up in social applications. But I am sure that often it leads to third-party open-social access polls, recent tweaks and stuff like that. So that would be great.

**LS:** Yeah, and that is really good. So Kyle, can you tell our listeners where they can find out more information about *Ning*? How do they get started?

**KF:** Sure, they go to [Ning.com](http://Ning.com) and "create a network". If you have created a network then you will want to talk to other people that have, to, say, exchange tips. We have a Social Network for that, obviously. It is called [NetworkCreators.Ning.com](http://NetworkCreators.Ning.com) and that is one of our helps for people sharing information and getting information about new stuff.

And then another site I plug is Preview.Ning.com. That is where we will show you streams and streamcast information about what coming down the pike and a few weeks; and sometimes as far as a few months.

**LS:** That's great!

**KF:** We try to keep our user-base pretty well informed as to what is coming so they can...actually they are network creators, too, so they want to inform their members first. So we do not want to leave them in a lurch so we try to be accessible for them.

**LS:** I really like the fact that you do tell, not only your users but also your developers and everybody else, the types of things that you are working on, so you are not blindsided and you can actually start preparing for it.

**KF:** Exactly, indirectly.

**LS:** That's really cool. So again, Kyle, geez, I would really like to thank Kyle Ford, Director of Product Marketing at *Ning*, for being here today and talking about Social Communities and, specifically, talking about *Ning*.

Kyle, truly, thank you very much.

**KF:** No problem, thank you!

**LS:** Thanks. This has been Lon Safko, the co-author of *The Social Media Bible*. Be sure to check out our other valuable Social Media tactics, tools, and strategies that can be found in *The Social Media Bible* book and its companion website, [www.thesocialmediabible.com](http://www.thesocialmediabible.com). And for more information about me, Lon Safko, please by all means, visit my website at [www.lonsafko.com](http://www.lonsafko.com).

And, again Kyle, thank you so much for being here today.

**KF:** Thank you for having me!