

EXPERIENCE IS KEY TO MANAGING WORKPLACE SOCIAL MEDIA

DEVELOP A COMPANY POLICY THAT REDUCES RISK, MAXIMIZES OPPORTUNITIES

Good news! After much cajoling, your company's brass has finally been convinced that social media isn't a passing fad. You're ready to make a name for yourself on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. Best of all, Tom in accounting has a son who says he can handle everything for you long distance. Life is good, right?

Not exactly. It sounds contradictory, but as your company gets its feet wet with social media, the most important factor in your success will be your experience.

Your company's experience at doing what you do best is why consumers will seek you out online and connect with you. Experienced employees will be most effective at tapping social media's full potential as a marketing, customer service and recruitment tool. And you can build upon existing policies and procedures as you develop company guidelines for using social media.

That experience is important because it can help you balance protection of your image with issues like employee rights. One Connecticut company's policy prohibits any online comments about the company; the National Labor Relations Board contends that policy is too broad. The board argues disparaging remarks about the company, posted on Facebook by a disgruntled union employee, qualify as protected speech.

With opportunities, more risks

As the Connecticut case shows, social media brings opportunities and challenges to the workplace. A recent survey compiled by Proofpoint, Inc., an enterprise email specialist, found the rate of social media-related terminations in 2010 (about seven percent) was nearly double the rate cited just two years ago. Social media's prevalence, ease of use and reputation for unfettered commentary increase the risk of an employee damaging your company's brand, either unwittingly or intentionally.

For example, just one flippant or sarcastic online response to customer feedback could start an avalanche of negative publicity about your company, as Nestle found out last year. Posts on the Nestle Facebook page that were critical of its use of palm oil prompted sniping from company representatives and threats to remove "negative" posts. The size and speed of the ensuing consumer backlash forced the company to admit mistakes and apologize for rudeness.

Employees engaging with social media need to participate in responsible ways that always strengthen your company's image. That's why the people entrusted with representing your company on your website, Facebook and elsewhere need to have a complete understanding of your company's brand and corporate culture, and a clear sense of how their work fits with all your company's goals and communication channels.

Establish a strong framework

An effective workplace social media policy should be built on the foundation of your company's existing workplace policies and procedures. Use

your experience to set up a solid framework that makes the most of social media opportunities while establishing safeguards that reduce risks.

The policy should start by letting employees know the company's purpose in using social media, whether it's to increase sales, build brand awareness, improve customer satisfaction or all of the above. It should specify who is responsible for account management and updates to all social media platforms, and articulate expectations for all employees' online access and conduct. Employees should understand the policy applies to all types of social networking, both on the job and off. The company can—and will—monitor employees' use of social media, including personal sites and blog postings.


Never assume these expectations can “go without saying.” Examples of common-sense rules that should be explicitly stated in all employee manuals and confidentiality agreements include:

- **Employees are expected to use good judgment at a times, being respectful and transparent, and disclosing their work relationship with the company.**
- **Proprietary or commercially sensitive information should never be disclosed.**
- **Employees should not claim or imply they are speaking on the company's behalf.**
- **Content must meet copyright and fair use laws.**
- **Employees should understand they are speaking “on the record” whenever they post online.**

Stay positive with education

The policy should state consequences for non-compliance, and anticipate worst-case scenarios like the release of confidential information by a disgruntled employee or criminal conduct involving a workplace computer. But stay positive in tone. After all, the purpose of the policy is positive: to empower employees with information that will make the most of their professional experience.

A training program can be an especially effective way to roll out the policy to employees, encouraging them to review the document and get answers to their questions. Such a program can familiarize employees with social media in general and with your company's online objectives in particular.

When employees are educated about the social media tools available and how to use them effectively, they can draw on their experience and feel confident about making positive contributions to the company's mission on these ever-evolving platforms. 



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