

By Debra Littlejohn Shinder, MCSE, MVP

A few years back, social networking (SN) was just for kids. Sites such as MySpace and Facebook were used primarily by teenagers and college students to interact with friends. Now as we approach the second decade of the twenty-first century, social networking has grown up and entered the mainstream. Everybody who's anybody has at least dabbled in it, and the demographics are definitely changing. I recently received a Facebook "friend" request from an 88-year-old lady, and she is by no means the only senior citizen on my friends list. Other friends include 20something family members and at least one 18-year-old who's a fan of my newsletters, as well as numerous colleagues in the tech industry, folks from high school, several aunts and cousins, and quite a few people I worked with in my law enforcement days.

When you have such an eclectic group of people all watching, at the same time, what you're saying, it can present some challenges and potential problems. Most of us don't slightly different personas depending on where we are and who we're with. We don't act the same or say the same things when we go to dinner with mom and dad as when we're out with longtime friends, and we adopt yet another demeanor when we're dining with business associates. Yet our social networks may bring people from all these groups, and others, together. That's why it's important to sit down and think about a few issues before you begin building a social network -- and plan a strategy that will let you enjoy its benefits without doing harm to your career, your marriage, or your friendships. And if it's too late for that, it's not too late to consider the following 10 things the next time you start to post to a SN site.

1 Where are you and what are you here for?

The first thing to consider is the nature of the social networking site(s) you're using. Some sites are geared toward professional and business relationships, while others are more purely social. Some posts that wouldn't cause anyone to lift an eyebrow on Facebook or MySpace would be considered inappropriate on LinkedIn. This is true even if you have the same contacts on both sites. Think of it this way: You probably don't behave exactly the same way in the office as when you're out at a restaurant or bar with friends from the office.

There are applications that allow you to link your updates across sites. For example, when you post to Twitter, the post also automatically becomes a status update to your Facebook page. This can save time and effort when used properly. However, if used incorrectly, it can alienate your friends. Twitter followers generally have no problem with you tweeting many times per day. Your Facebook friends may not be as happy to see your hourly updates, especially if they're along the lines of "Now I'm about to go to the store," and "Just finished dinner and ready to load the dishwasher." I know several people who have gone so far as to "unfriend" Facebook friends whose excessive Twitter updates fill up their feed.

Whereas some sites, such as LinkedIn and Classmates.com, have a more narrowly defined purpose, the more general SN sites can be used in different ways. A Facebook page can be used to keep in touch with family and friends who live far away, to get back in touch with old schoolmates or former work colleagues, to interact with others in your industry, to try to find a job, or as a dating service. Any of those purposes can be a legitimate use of the sites, but you may run into problems if you try to combine purposes on one site.

2 Who's in the audience?

Social networking is generally (although not exclusively) a form of written communication. All writers know that the first rule of writing is to know who's in your audience, because that determines not only what you say but also how you say it. If you've decided to use SN as a general public broadcast tool, being familiar with everyone in the audience is not as important. For instance, I use Twitter to announce when I have a new article published or make a new blog post, or to call attention to articles by others that I feel are worthwhile. My Twitter page is open to everyone and goes into the public timeline, and I keep my updates there appropriate for that purpose.

My Facebook account is used for a very different purpose and is closed to the public. I find it best to know something about the people in that smaller circle of friends, to be aware of issues that might be hot buttons and topics of conversation that may make some of them uncomfortable. You also have to keep in mind that you can't please everybody. One of my Facebook friends recently criticized me for posting about "trivial topics" like birds and cats and TV shows when there are so many important and even life-threatening things going on in the world. Another friend noted that Facebook is where she comes to get away from the political arguments, dire economic forecasts, and other unpleasantness. And others likened your social networking page to your living room or front yard -- a place that belongs to you, but where others pass through to visit. On your own private property, you set the tone and the rules. If others don't like it, they can leave; if they don't respect your rules, you can have those visitors removed.

Ultimately, most sites allow you to control who your audience is, and many of us pick our online friends pretty carefully. Then there are those who are "friend collectors." You know who I'm talking about: the guy or gal who has 1,500 "friends," many of whom he/she has never met, virtually or otherwise, and knows nothing about -- but he/she feels validated by this "popularity." Politicians and celebrities often fall into this category, too. Sometimes, not so much because they compulsively seek out "friends" as because they're afraid to refuse any friendship request for fear it will mean a lost vote or a disgruntled fan. How many friends is too many? Only you can decide -- and there's no right answer. What's important is that you decide whether to have an open door policy or to be more picky, and tailor your posts accordingly.

3 Do you dare mix business with pleasure?

One of the biggest dangers of social networking comes when you mix your audiences -- for example, having friends or followers who are business associates on the same account as personal friends, family members, and so forth. Deciding what is or isn't appropriate to post can get complicated really fast in that situation. A seemingly innocuous joke that your old college buddies might enjoy a lot may fall flat or even come across as offensive to a business colleague, causing awkwardness in working together. Comments you make in response to an office mate's post on your wall could inadvertently reveal business information that those outside the company shouldn't know. A family member's teasing remark on your page about how drunk you got at Uncle Dave's birthday party could put you in a bad light if your boss reads it. And do you really want all your Internet pals to see those pictures of you as an awkward teenager that your Aunt Maggie tagged?

Then there are all those games and third-party apps that permeate some of the social networking sites. It might not matter much if you publish your progress in harvesting your crops on Farm Town, but if your favorite pastime is consuming gallons of virtual alcohol and sending rounds to your drinking buddies, that might not be the image you really want to convey to a potential future employer or client (or your mom).

4 It's not just what you post

As we touched on with Aunt Maggie's photos above, it's not just what you post yourself that can get you in trouble. Especially if you're new to social networking, you might not realize that your friends may be able to see some or all of what your other friends post on your site, as well as pictures they post on their own sites that "tag" (identify) you as one of the subjects.

Others' posts can end up embarrassing you without intending to, so keep in mind that old adage about choosing your friends wisely. And remember that it works two ways: Don't post things on a friend's site that could be an embarrassment to him/her if the other person's boss, spouse, or minister saw it.

5 A picture is worth a thousand words -- and can be a thousand times more embarrassing

Social sites such as Facebook and MySpace allow you to post much more than text. You can share pictures, videos, links, and more. This enables rich interaction, but it also provides even greater opportunities to make a faux pas that could be damaging to your career, marriage, or friendships.

Rule number one: Don't post pictures or videos of yourself in "compromising positions" -- drinking/drunk, in provocative dress (or lack thereof), showing off your (usually not visible) tattoo, hanging all over someone other than your spouse (or even if you're single, someone else's spouse), and so forth. Don't do it even if it's obvious to you that it's just a joke. Don't do it even if you think you've restricted viewing of the album to just your closest friends. Remember that even if you come to your senses tomorrow and take the picture down, someone could already have copied and saved it.

Rule number two: Don't post pictures or videos of other people without their permission or unless you're absolutely sure they don't mind -- including pictures that are not at all compromising or offensive. Some societies equate taking a photo of someone with stealing that person's soul. While most people wouldn't go that far, many folks don't like being photographed or having pictures of themselves displayed, even if you think they look great.

Also be cautious about "photo overload." Friends enjoy seeing your favorite pictures, but don't upload *all* 247 pictures from your trip to Maui or every single picture you take of your new grandbaby. Pick out a few of the best. And don't put 50 photos of yourself on your site and none of anyone else. That makes you look a bit narcissistic, at best.

6 Sensitive subjects can come back to bite you

Many people use status updates to post about what they're doing at a given time. Others use them more as mini journal entries, saying whatever might be on their minds regarding current events, their personal lives, etc. As in the "real world," you have to be careful when you start offering opinions, judgments, and commentaries. Venture carefully when you address the traditional hot topics: politics, sex, and religion.

You should also think twice before you report on your involvement in legal issues or post something that might have ramifications pertaining to tax matters. Your joking post on Uncle Ed's wall thanking him for taking you to dinner on his company's expense account could mark the last time he ever takes you to dinner -- or speaks to you. Your venting about something going on at work -- or even your excitement about what's happening there -- could get you in trouble or be a violation of a contractual agreement.

Be careful in responding to others' rants and raves, too. If a friend or co-worker posts about the rotten thing her husband did to her, offering your sympathy might seem like the right thing to do. But two weeks later, when they've kissed and made up, she may not remember with kindness your eager agreement about what a rotten guy he is.

7 Avoid the perils of PUI: Posting under the influence

We all know that driving under the influence of alcohol or other mind-altering substances can lead to tragedy. Posting to social networking sites when you're inebriated can be almost as dangerous. Being under the influence of strong emotions, such as anger, fear, or grief, or suffering from lack of sleep can similarly impair your judgment and cause you to post things you otherwise wouldn't.

This is such a common phenomenon that Google's Gmail has an add-on feature (called Mail Googles, enabled through the Labs tab in the account Settings) that requires you to solve math problems before you can send email late at night on the weekends. The idea is to ensure that your cognition is not impaired and to prevent you from sending messages you might regret later.

8 Be ready to reject a friendship request or "unfriend" someone

Some people have a hard time saying no. But if you accept every friendship request you receive, you may end up feeling as if you've thrown open the doors of your home and now you have a bunch of strangers camped out in your living room, watching -- and commenting on -- everything you do and say. This all goes back to knowing your audience. It also requires that you have the courage to risk hurting some feelings by declining some offers of friendship.

Even more difficult is the decision to "unfriend" a person who's already on your friend list. It might help to know that most sites don't explicitly notify people when they've been removed from your list of friends.

And if you don't mind having those people see your posts but just don't want to see theirs -- maybe they constantly rant about politics or proselytize about their religions, or maybe they just post dozens of status updates a day that are boring -- you may not need to unfriend them. Facebook, for example, allows you to "hide" a particular person's posts from your friend feed. They still see all your updates (unless, of course, they hide you, too).

9 Are you familiar with the site's settings and options?

One of the most important things you can do when you start using a social networking site is to completely familiarize yourself with how it works and the settings and options you can configure. You may be able to place people into groups and then control which of your items (wall posts, friends' posts, etc.) they can see on a group-by-group or individual basis. When you upload photos, you may be able to restrict who can see specific pictures or albums. You may be able to specify that you be notified via email of various events, such as a person replying to one of your posts or someone tagging you in a photo, so that you won't be taken by surprise. You can even prevent friends from posting to your wall altogether or use the customization options to allow only specific friends to see wall postings.

Social networking sites provide sophisticated privacy tools; take advantage of them to prevent faux pas. But remember that others who do have access can take screen shots or even digital photos of the screen and forward them to others.

10 Should you use a pseudonym?

You might be wondering if the best way to avoid all these problems is to just use a pseudonym for your social networking accounts. You could create a fake persona and say whatever you want and nobody would know it's you. Aside from the fact that this pretty much defeats the whole purpose of social networking -- getting to know people and letting them get to know you -- it is also a violation of the Terms of Service (ToS) of most social networking sites. In fact, in a famous court case, a woman in Missouri was charged with unauthorized computer access because she violated the ToS by creating a MySpace account with a false identity. (For details, see [Judge tentatively acquits woman in MySpace case.](#)) Although she was acquitted of the criminal charge, this points up the fact that the ToS is in essence a contract, and violating its terms can have legal ramifications.

Summary

Who knew there was so much to think about before ripping off a quick post to your favorite social networking site? But not stopping to consider what you're saying, and to whom you're saying it, can have serious consequences. In many ways, the Internet is forever -- and your actions there can come back to haunt you years later. Social networking can be a useful tool for both business and personal purposes, as long as you use it the right way.

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