

Social and Business Networking Just Don't Mix

BY PAUL POMPEO

One Monday morning a couple of months ago, a regional manager with a lighting dimming/controls manufacturer sent me an e-mail with a link titled, "Life in La-La Land." As I clicked on it, I was very surprised at what I saw. A woman wearing only a black bra and panties, probably in her 20s—I say probably, because the photo started at her shoulders and stopped above her knees—appeared to be sitting in the front passenger seat of a moving vehicle. It looked to be taken by the driver, while the vehicle was traveling. The caption read "Life in La-La Land."

Before questioning why I begin a column in a seemingly salacious manner, let me provide some context. This was a Facebook update (I'm currently not using Facebook for a variety of reasons, one of which is that I believe it to be primarily a personal/social site with few business networking opportunities, à la MySpace). The sender of this update is a very bright, up-and-coming sales professional. Apparently, this was a photo he took with his cell phone or Blackberry and posted to his Facebook site. So how did it end up in my inbox? Simple—he had sent me a request to add me as a "friend" on his Facebook site a

few months beforehand when I had been using Facebook. Unless you specify otherwise, any changes you make in Facebook (and many other social networking sites) are immediately sent out to all of your Facebook "friends" (i.e., contacts).

From what I know of this individual, he is no dummy. He had come across (before this) as both very bright and (I thought) Internet savvy. He probably added me as a friend on Facebook to stay in touch and keep himself on my radar. Although in this case he wasn't thinking of the ramifications of a set of Facebook friends that combines actual friends along with business contacts. Apparently, he hadn't put sufficient restrictions on the settings in his Facebook account; not an example of good judgment or decision making, to say the least.

BLURRY LINES

In an earlier stage of the Internet's continuing evolution, social interaction (besides e-mail) occurred in chat rooms and on message boards. A more recent phenomenon is social networking sites. It's fascinating to watch these sites evolve, but as the number of sites multiply and gain more users, many people seem to

have forgotten that most things they write (or photos they share) can be seen by people other than those for whom they're intended.

I suggest taking a close look at your social networking account, whether it is Jigsaw, Facebook, Plaxo, My Space, Twitter, Spoke or LinkedIn. Are there photos, comments or information that could cost you a promotion, or, worst case, cause you to lose your current (or desired) position?

One of the newer and fastest growing of these network sites, Twitter, is still finding its way. While offering a fun way for friends to keep in touch, its true usefulness in a business context is still evolving and yet to be determined. The vast majority of tweets I see are simply shameless daily product advertising (the type of information that would cause you to block the sender if sent via e-mail). Basically, they amount to company propaganda.

The other type of tweet is often inane and/or arcane personal updates/comments ("Whoo-hoo, futon!!" and "Peanut butter gets it out" were two actual tweets I received over the past couple of days.) Not surprisingly, the people who tweet most frequently (often once or twice daily) usually offer information that is much less interesting or informative than from those who tweet less often.

Here are some suggestions and caveats that can make online networking a positive experience, not a minefield for your career prospects:

1. **You're an employee, not a candidate.** If you're out of work, making your profile look as

much like a résumé as possible is of no risk and in fact is a terrific marketing tool. However, if you're currently employed, make sure that your business-related profile doesn't lead off with an "objective" (as a résumé would) or a self-congratulatory/promotional paragraph that gives the impression you're marketing yourself for other opportunities.

It's not inconceivable that companies will begin to crack down

interested won't send a good message to your employer.

- 2. Maintain your "curb appeal."** If you're in a job-seeking mode, you don't want to say anything that can negatively affect a potential employer's impressions of you. I know of one national sales manager at an LED company who posts updates a few times a week to his LinkedIn profile—these include if he's attending a job fair, flying to an interview or "still look-

do you really want to send out the message, week after week, that you're *still* on the market?

Likewise, listing your current position as the "volunteer leader for a networking group for people who are out of work," while nothing to be ashamed of, is probably not the online message you want to send out to potential employers. You want to market yourself as a valued potential employee, not as the best out-of-work outplacement leader there is.

Another job seeker, out of work and actively looking for his next position, chose to post "Nothing like cruising around the Napa foothills and tasting great wine!" Again, nothing wrong with cruising around Napa *or* tasting great wine (as someone who used to live in Sausalito and is Italian, I happen to have an appreciation for both), but posting this on a site seen by your industry peers and potential employers might not be the best marketing move. Later, he included personal photos of a trip he had taken replete with misspellings in his captions. To paraphrase law enforcement, "Everything you say (or, in this case, write) may be used against you."

- 3. Be careful when leaving tracks.** Many of these sites (such as Facebook and LinkedIn) actually show the date and exact time of your posting. Posting things on company time that are not work-related could be possible cause for discipline and/or termination, depending on your company's policies.

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on employees who appear to be using a business networking website to promote other employment opportunities rather than develop good business/supplier/product/customer contacts. Just as important, you don't want to provide fodder for a possible termination.

Unless you're a human resources professional and on the other side of the interview table, including "job inquiries" as one of the types of communication in which you're

ing for a sales manager position" (one of his updates). The more you update your status (whether on Plaxo, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to say that you're on the road to another interview ("Traveling to Des Moines for a job interview in sales management"), the more you're going to hammer home the impression that while you're going out on many interviews, you still haven't landed a job. There's no crime in that, but

CAREERS + HIRING

4. The eyes of Google are upon you. We've already seen companies Google candidates in whom they have interest. What are they looking for? A variety of things, including any "skeletons" or activities that could cause concern for a potential employer. If the most they will find is that you're involved with your local Big Brother/Big Sister organization or local IES section, then you're probably fine. Most often, though, the first thing to come up in Google, Yahoo or MSN searches will be your social networking profile.

5. Check your settings. On most networking sites, if you look

carefully you can control your information (i.e., who can and cannot see it). Only allow contacts that you have approved to see your personal information.

My recommendation is to keep the majority of your social networking for just that—your social, not business contacts. If you want to create a site for your friends and family, create a separate profile. Keep in mind if you use your name, current or potential employers will be able to see much of your personal site with a quick Internet search.

There's an old saying that business and pleasure don't mix. This applies to social networking sites as well.



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