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Social Media Dos and Don'ts

By Terrence Chin

Note: This article will deal primarily with social media, but most of the ideas presented can be applied to information on the internet in general.

This article will describe some techniques and precautions you can take to safely use the Web and social media sites in particular. This will help you maintain a pristine online reputation.

Have you ever Googled yourself? If not, go ahead to Google, enter your name in the search box (you may want to include your locale or alma mater in the search), and press enter. What do you find?

For most of you, the results will be meaningless. There will be people of the same name, from all different types of fields and with various achievements—but none of them will be you. This is a good thing; when it comes to your online identity, you have a clean slate.

Some of you will actually find yourself—your Facebook profile, a news bulletin about an achievement of yours, or perhaps an event that happened surrounding you. Hopefully, the search results contain items you are proud of, and are a part of a positive online reputation. Keep in mind however, that it is very important to proactively protect your online reputation. The tips below are designed to help you continue to protect yourself and also maximize the potential of social media.

Areas of Caution

Proper discretion in sharing information is fundamental to protecting your identity. This simple rule has been stated over and over again, but cannot be emphasized enough. Since all information in a social media account comes from the user, it is therefore essential that you think clearly before posting a piece of information about yourself.

Details about your personal life need not be posted on your Facebook wall, and angry, ranting tweets can damage your credibility. It is also a good idea to review your profile and remove supplementary information such as home address and cell phone numbers. Be sure to review each photo you post online to ensure that it is something

you want the world to see. Nowadays, once online, content that can be potentially embarrassing or controversial naturally attracts attention and often remains against the will of the original poster.

Another method of protecting photos, content and identity online is to use appropriate privacy settings. Despite all the news stories and information on privacy settings, surprisingly, most social media users still fail to limit the information the public can see. For example, privacy settings for Facebook allow you to remove your profile from public searches (such as Google), and also choose what information about you a third party can see (if any). A layered profile can be created by customizing what your friends, networks and other Facebook users can see about you. For example, you can allow your friends access to your profile, wall and photos, your networks to see only your profile, and finally everyone else can only see your name, alma mater and profile picture.

Here is another word of caution: potential employers may Google you or search for your profile on Facebook. According to [CareerBuilder](#), search engines are used by 77 percent of corporate recruiters to investigate applicants. Although such recruitment practices are not publicized by companies, it is wise to err on the side of caution and assume firms will screen candidates online and investigate profiles on social media Web sites. By using proper discretion and appropriate privacy settings, you can protect your integrity. Failure to use sound judgment online may lead to a loss of credibility even before an interview!

Employers are not the only ones that may be using the internet to conduct research. A study by the [Pew Internet & American Life Project](#) (www.pewinternet.org) found that 53 percent of adults use search engines to find information about peers. Your friends and colleagues, or even a potential significant other may Google you and browse through your internet profile. Having a positive online reputation reduces the chances that you will be represented by anything except your actions in person.

The tips above are without a doubt cliché and regularly preached. However, this does not negate their validity or importance. Discretion and privacy alone can prevent a public relations disaster.

Professional Tools

Hopefully you now appreciate the gravity of how improper social media usage can lead to a damaged reputation. Yet there are social media sites that can help separate you from the pack and help you become more professional. LinkedIn is one such tool.

The goal of LinkedIn is to provide a way for professionals to keep in touch. Rather than making friends, connections are established. LinkedIn helps to establish a network for referrals and contact with working professionals from all types of fields. An added bonus is the ability to see who has viewed your profile. LinkedIn provides a more formal method of keeping in touch with colleagues, superiors, professors, classmates and other acquaintances.

This can be a double-edged sword. While LinkedIn lets you present a professional image of yourself, it also offers you a distinct chance to be unprofessional. For example, if one of your connections messages or refers you, but you fail to respond within a reasonable timeframe, you will likely appear unprofessional. Thus, using tools such as LinkedIn requires a commitment to regularly check your profile and respond to notifications.

Social Media Usage Tip Summary

Here is a summary of Social Media Dos and Don'ts in our increasingly digital society (please note that this is not a comprehensive list, although it serves as an important reminder):

Do

- Use proper discretion when using social media Web sites
- Adjust privacy settings to adequately protect your information
- Remove unnecessary information such as home address and phone numbers from online accounts
- Check your reputation online regularly

Don't

- Post personal information or photos that you would be reluctant to show potential employers or law enforcement agencies
- Let your accounts become idle, especially if it is a primary method of contact for your professional acquaintances
- Use social media sites in intense emotional states (e.g., anger)

Reputation Repair

For those of you who have a tarnished online reputation, remember it is not the end of the world. Depending on the severity of the situation, you may want to consult professionals such as [Reputation Defender](#), which offers comprehensive services to protect and repair online reputations. Their Web site is also a great resource on how to further protect your reputation.

Social media Web sites are great for keeping in touch and a true communication gem in our digital age. Remember to use the internet responsibly, as the consequences can be every bit as real as your actions in person.