



## **How to develop social media guidelines for your employees**

*By Henry Fawell*

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Ever raised an eyebrow at an employee's off-color remark at the water cooler? Imagine if that employee walked out in to the street and shouted that same comment through a bullhorn. Believe it or not, that happens every day on social media networks, where an employee's musings can be read by thousands of people, often times with great consequences for an employer.

Case in point: In January, an executive from Ketchum Public Relations posted insulting comments about the city of Memphis on Twitter. The problem? He was in Memphis at the time and was hours away from pitching FedEx for new business. FedEx caught wind of the comments and publicly denounced the executive, putting one of the world's largest PR firms in the unenviable position of apologizing for its own PR gaffe.

Yet for every gaffe, there are countless examples of companies and employees using social media to improve their brands and best practices. So how do you, a manager, weigh the promise of social media with the perils it presents as a soapbox for anyone with internet access?

The answer may lie in drafting guidelines for your employees. It's no different than your company standards of conduct, and leading companies are now channeling their employees' use of social media through clearly-stated policies. Here are some tips to get you started:

**Educate:** Many of your employees have never used social media. So give them a primer. Host a presentation to educate them on common social media tools – LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook – and how they are changing the workplace and our lives. When your employees understand the challenges and opportunities presented by social media, they're more likely to see the value in a company policy.

**Build guardrails:** To help guide your team, define what is acceptable conduct in social media communities. It's appropriate to use social media to inform the public about your product or to correct inaccurate information about your company. It's not appropriate to argue with customers on blogs or post content that reflects poorly on the employee or the company. Call it the newspaper test: Your employees shouldn't write anything online they wouldn't want to read in tomorrow's newspaper.

**Be supportive:** Encourage your team to explore social media. They'll open new doors to professional development and strengthen your company's marketing and reputation management efforts. They'll put a human face on your company in an era when too many companies are perceived as cold and indifferent. Designate a group of social media-savvy employees, starting with your communications and legal teams, to mentor your workforce along the way.

**Trust and Responsibility:** The best corporate social media policies are built on trust and responsibility. Cisco, IBM, Yahoo!, and Intel have adopted policies that trust their employees to use social media in a productive manner while emphasizing that employees are personally responsible for what they publish.

**Be transparent:** Employees should be honest about their identity when participating in online conversations. To do otherwise is to invite needless risk. Ask John Mackey, the CEO of Whole Foods. He sparked controversy in 2007 by criticizing a rival, Wild Oats Markets, under a fake name on online message boards. Even worse, he denied his true identity when confronted by online communities. The misstep generated weeks of embarrassing headlines for Whole Foods and even caught the eye of the Federal Trade Commission.

**Address "off the clock" activities:** Nobody wants their boss dictating what they can and can't publish online from the privacy of their own home. But addressing online activities outside the workplace is not without precedent if a company's business interests are at risk. Why? Because customers, investors, and reporters can view most online commentary and photos. If a reporter sees a controversial comment from your employee on Twitter, the fact that it was published from a home computer doesn't undo the damage to your company. Once again, the newspaper test applies.

**Be realistic:** You'll never control everything your employees do online, nor should you want to. Remember, the goal is not to shut down an employee's access to the information superhighway. It is to build guardrails that keep your team and your company from skidding off the freeway.

I am a firm believer in social media's capacity to empower companies and their employees, and it's only a matter of time before most of the workforce has joined the online conversation. Whether they use it the right way or the wrong way is in no small part up to the executives that lead them. Show them the way, and chances are good they'll reward you.

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