

ARE YOU A TWIT? WHAT'S YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA IQ?

How many of your station personalities, news staff and others are blogging, twittering or using other forms of social and business networking? Hopefully, a lot!! A study has found that revenue, gross margins and profits correlate nicely with companies that are the most engaged with social media. As reported in a recent ZDNet blog, a report by Charlene Li of the Altimeter Group and Wetpaint that ranks the top 100 brands by social media engagement concludes:

. . . companies that are both deeply and widely engaged in social media surpass their peers in terms of both revenue and profit performance by a significant difference. In fact, these Mavens have sustained strong revenue and margin growth in spite of the current economy.

http://www.engagementdb.com/downloads/ENGAGEMENTdb_Report_2009.pdf

Of the ten industries using social media described in the study, the standout best performer was **communications (print and broadcast)**. While broadcasting was not among the specific media studied, the inference is that broadcasting will also benefit disproportionately from on-line social media.

But is it safe? As useful as it might be, and as necessary as it is becoming, there can be many hidden dangers in the use of social media. And whether you know it or not, many of your employees may be using it already and creating an image for your station with that use.

In this Internet age, every employer should have policies in place to govern the use of their own company internet sites and social media identities, but also to govern employee use of the internet social media in ways that may reflect on the employer. Employers should know how their employees participate in social media such as Facebook, Twitter and public forums. A commenting and participation policy should be clearly stated at the time of employment, when a site is put out, and at regular intervals thereafter. Here's a good test: regularly Google or Twitter your company name and "sucks" just to see what people are saying. The key is that you need to know in advance. No station wants to be in a position of having to shut down its site, even temporarily. To most consultants, a temporary shutdown is as negative as a permanent one.

Every station needs a station and personnel policy about public participation in social media that addresses or references the company. The terms of engagement should be published and available in a station document library and as part of the employee handbook. The employee participation policy should help define acceptable online behavior. While not media-related companies, examples can be found on the IBM and Intel websites at:

<http://www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html> and at http://www.intel.com/sites/sitewide/en_US/social-media.htm. There are also dozens of consultants online recommending the rules of engagement.

Media giant CNN had to "feel the pain" for not having a blogging policy.

<http://www.nevillehobson.com/2008/02/19/consequences-for-not-having-a-blogging-policy/> On the other hand, BBC already has a comprehensive policy posted for its employees and the public. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/advice/personalweb/index.shtml>

Good guidelines include a definition of what you want to achieve for your company and professionally, and what you expect the policy to do, such as encourage online participation, but in a responsible way consistent with professional ethical standards and company policies, without being limiting or censoring. Explain how the policies fit within the overall brand strategy of the station, and make sure that there is a clearly defined station official responsible for implementing and interpreting the policy.

It will be instructive if you start a pilot project with some staff already using social media to explore how it works and what is effective. Establish policies to stay current with the trends and periodically evaluate the project and to make sure that it is consistent with all other company other policies.

An important related policy will govern the use of the company e-mail accounts. Increasingly, as business moves away from written hard copy communications, e-mails bearing the company URL domain are viewed as official letterhead and regarded as company communications. Therefore, personal e-mail should be sent from personal e-mail accounts, while business related messages should be sent from company e-mail accounts. An effective e-mail policy should address appropriate business use of e-mail, including a reminder of the company's non-discrimination/anti-harassment policies, a reminder that all e-mail remains the property of the company, and outline penalties for violation.

Company policies on correct use of social media, personal e-mail and company privacy policies should become a part of the regular training programs of every station. However, there is always the potential for crisis resulting from these types of plans, and every company should also have a plan for dealing with the types of situations that can arise from these important new ways to communicate. Plan for the crisis and be sure that there is an executive prepared to focus on the problem and respond to the public.

With proper planning, corporate policies and clear delegation of responsibility, social media can be a major and necessary resource for your station brand identity and relationship to your community. It can also be an exciting way to engage employees and your audience. Developing new policies to define the goals and parameters of the use of social media in your station's environment can be complicated by existing personnel policies and laws affecting employees, particularly labor laws. The advice of your legal counsel or human resources consultant is instrumental to ensuring that the policies are consistent and in compliance with the law, while also meeting your business goals.

Contributing to this article were Charlie Edwards and Theresa Sprain of the Womble Carlyle Labor and Employment practice group.