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# Social security

**Networking sites, which are aimed at strengthening links between friends, can heighten the impact of word-of-mouth marketing and have unintended consequences for business.**

**O**NCE, "FRIENDS" were people you met regularly. Friends went to the movies together. Friends occasionally had one beer too many and woke up beside each other on a park bench. Sometimes friends were workmates. Sometimes they were actually your significant other's friends. You and your friends drifted apart when you changed jobs (or your significant other).

Today, the world is very, very different. The circle of friends expands and grows. Friends that move away can be "followed" with social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace. Because of Facebook, I know that a former colleague has just received a kitten called Stitch. It's a cute cat, but I haven't met that person in eight years.

Today, people are Facebooked, MySpaced and LinkedIn. They Flickr and Twitter and Qik. People blog and they YouTube.

Today's workforce talks over the internet in myriad ways, at all times and at every opportunity. The line between work and leisure has become blurred. Social networking sites can have a real business impact.

This internet networking trend is positive in several ways. For example, searching for a candidate's name will provide more background than a resumé ever will. A footprint on the internet will exist somewhere. Potential employers can be better informed about the candidate. The same approach can be used for prospective suppliers of products or services.

## EMBARRASSING PHOTOS

Candidates or suppliers with personal photographs in the Facebook group "embarrassing party photos" may not like this. However, it's not only the young that can have unsavoury photos appear online. At least one Facebook user has shown poor professional judgement by posting a photo of a grey-haired managing director giving a Nazi salute. The poor fellow probably doesn't know it exists.

A scan of blogs and other online tools

for potential candidates who are expressing frustration with their current job may be helpful when recruiting. Headhunting to fill specialist roles can be much easier in this digital world.

On the other hand, customers with bad experiences will probably tell their story on the internet. Today's mobile technologies allow this to occur before the customer has even left the store. Many prospective customers today will perform a search on the business. These customers tend to believe an anonymous internet posting in preference to information in a marketing brochure.

Employees' activities out of hours can also have an impact. The legal liability is at best murky when an employee stalks a colleague using social networking tools. When businesses ask employees to put their details on MySpace or Facebook as part of a recruitment drive, a legal problem may quickly arise if an employee is stalked, attacked or has their identity stolen using this information.

## INADVERTENT LEAKS

Likewise, LinkedIn is a popular social networking site for professionals. This website provides a "news feed" of the events occurring in your network of contacts. Secrets can inadvertently be given away by staff members setting up their LinkedIn status.

For example: "Micheal Axelsen is developing a proposal for Can-Do Technologies." This is important information as LinkedIn also allows a contact to see their contact's contacts, which can provide an interesting insight into that contact's marketing activities.

Business should respond in some way. This year the CPA Australia Information Technology and Management Centre of Excellence is writing a guide for business on appropriate policies to adopt for social networking. At the least, we encourage businesses to understand their internet footprint. A regular search upon the business name, the names of key products and the senior management team is essential. Google Alerts is a good tool that can alert you to new content of this nature.

**\* Companies should tell staff what behaviour and content is appropriate in living out their digital lives.**

Staff should also be aware of the risks and issues for the business and their career when posting information online. At least one Facebook user was astonished to find photographs of herself in an inebriated state. And she is desperately trying to get "friends of friends" to delete the photographs.

The social networking phenomenon is here to stay and will continue to grow. Businesses should review the impact of social networking on their business. There is a need to communicate to all staff what is appropriate behaviour and content when living out their digital life.

Businesses should monitor their internet footprint and plan a response when the business is mentioned online. But note that the banning of social networking is unlikely to be helpful. It is important for businesses to adopt a sensible and informed approach, and to make themselves aware of the potential risks and problems.

Social networking: sometimes, it is about business. And we mean business. \*

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