



PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA USE AS A LEADER - QUICK TIPS

Social media use is ubiquitous. There are more social media apps and sites than most people can name. Facebook has more members than many countries have citizens. You probably have more than one social media account. While there are many benefits to social media, the misuse can be disruptive to career and unit. Here, we discuss social media benefits and pitfalls, how to maintain a professional persona on social media, and how to respond to social media disasters.

Benefits of Social Media Use

- Social media helps to establish common ground that can promote social interactions and senses of belonging—or exclusion when misused.
- It allows people to interact with each other on a personal level. It can facilitate positive relationships and enhance trust among professional colleagues.
- Social media can provide insights into what others are doing without significant investment, which can help initiate new connections and maintain established connections, even over long distances and time.
- Social media also allows people to see the personal similarities that can be convenient touch-points for professional communication.
- Social media can offer opportunities for crossing knowledge boundaries due to visibility into the work of others, groups, departments, or locations.
- It can provide a helpful network for circulating information and resources within groups of professionals with similar interests, which can lead to potential collaborations.
- Social media can be a helpful tool in the classroom. It can create a space for teachers to distribute and track information on a topic rapidly, to gain insights into students' shared experiences and reactions, and for students to ask, answer questions, interact with their classmates, and get feedback in a “safe” setting. This can improve student motivation and engagement, help them develop a more social/collaborative view of learning and create a connection to real-life learning.

Pitfalls of Social Media Use

- Social media can threaten the boundary between personal and work life. It can allow the intrusion of work into the private domain, and vice versa.
- Social media can affect personal relationships in a negative way. Negative impressions and feeling about social media posts can translate into perception of others in real life. In some cases, discontent with social media posts can disrupt collegial relationships, even friendships and family relationships.
- Peripheral awareness of others may create an illusion that real social connections exist when they do not. Insights into the lives of others and interactions vis social media do not ensure social bondings. They only offer opportunities for developing stronger connections.
- Social media can provide false representations. Opinions and judgement base on social media activity may not always reflect the true person.
- Social media can raise the risk of privacy invasions by making personal contact lists public.
- Reputations are vulnerable when personal life details are exposed, especially for leaders who have their employees or students connected to them via social media.





- Because information on social media gets spread quickly, social media posts can affect professional interactions, even if posts are not explicitly about work, or are not directly connected to their professional profiles.
- Interpretations of posts by others can be misread or misrepresented. For example, a picture from a vacation may seem innocuous, but something not noticed or perceived in the background could turn otherwise harmless sharing into a viral embarrassment.
- Sensitive topics, such as political or social commentaries, comments with racial or prejudicial connotations, and/or religious content can be particularly hazardous.

How to Use Social Media Effectively

Consider and establish your personal boundaries, and consider carefully the potential benefits and pitfalls before connecting with your professional colleagues on social media.

If you decide to connect with your colleagues on social media, be mindful about your professional persona. Some tips for a professional appearance on social media include:

- **Vigilantly protect your reputation.** Avoid posting content that you are not willing to stand behind in public, and consider carefully before sharing (or oversharing) details of your personal life. Keep in mind that it can be as detrimental to complain as it is to boast about personal life on social media.
- **Watch your language.** Because social media postings can circulate quickly, aggressive language should absolutely be avoided.
- **Monitor your privacy.** Understand and adjust privacy settings on social media to reflect the extent to which you are comfortable sharing details of your personal life with others. Some social media platforms, for example, permit restrictions on certain audiences viewing certain posts. Consider separate professional and personal accounts if the sites do not allow this (and perhaps even if they do).
- **Keep professional comments positive.** Comment about your employer, colleagues, and mission will be more professional if kept to the positive realm. Complaining or disclosing important professional information on social media can be profoundly damaging.
- **Assume all comments are public.** Social media, no matter your privacy settings, should be considered a public forum at all times: Assume posts will be shared beyond your intended audience and monitor yourself accordingly. Do not share information you wish safeguarded.
- **Expect the unexpected.** Even if you keep it professional on social media, expect that some others may not. Colleagues and students can sometime behave unprofessionally on social media.
- **Students.** Do not connect students with your personal social media content while you are teaching them. If you use social media in the classroom, consult best practices guides as they evolve.

FRONT PAGE TEST

If you are not comfortable with your social media post appearing on the front page of a newspaper or public website, it is time to reconsider before posting.

Responding When Problems Arise on Social Media

- **Assess the situation.** When a negative situation arises from social media, take a moment to assess the situation. Try to gather information and form an evaluation of who was involved and affected, whether the situation is under control or an ongoing issue, and what has been done in response to it. Understanding the situation will assist you in determining the appropriate next steps.





- **Take conversations out of the public view.** Social media is not the best place to resolve complex issues. Being in a public forum can make it hard for the parties involved to soften their stances and come to a peaceful resolution. Thus, it is better to carry the conversation in more appropriate channels of communication (e.g., in-person or telephone, email if no other options are available). Taking the situation out of the public spotlight can help prevent further attention and unnecessary dissemination.
- **Consider (temporarily) disabling your account.** Many social media sites allow you to disable your account temporarily, which can help limit the number of posts and responses that are “tagged” to you. This may help until the “storm” passes. If you find yourself in frequent embarrassing situations, it may be best to disable permanently.
- **Maintain control of your emotions.** A negative social media situation can escalate quickly and take a toll on your emotions. However, responding with a negative tone or taking a defensive stance will only make the conflict more intense. Try to be in control of your emotions and attitude, and handle the situation with a positive and empathetic manner. (See our Emotional Intelligence resources.)
- **Consult appropriate departments if necessary.** Depending on the seriousness of the situation, you can consult appropriate departments within your institution (e.g., public relations, teaching resource support, legal, etc.). They may be able to step in and help prevent the situation from getting worse, as well as protect your reputation. External insights can also sometimes be helpful in obtaining a solution to the problem.