

How to Separate the Personal and Professional on Social Media

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Let's face it: social media is risky. A single unfortunate post can throw a career off track. And yet in an era in which younger workers are connected with an average of 16 co-workers online and where 40% to 60% of hiring managers use social media to screen potential hires, it is simply not reasonable to stay off social media entirely. So how can we balance the personal and professional online?

In a recent research study, we spoke with dozens of professionals about their use of social media, and were struck by the variety of approaches they are using.

Some professionals, we found, still manage to avoid social media altogether. But most see that as unrealistic in many occupations, and are unwilling to be deprived of the advantages social media affords in terms of connecting to people and collecting information. Many in some way recreate in social media the kinds of boundaries, or mental fences, they use in real life to organize their worlds. These boundaries serve people well offline, and they can perform their function online, too.

Before making any conscious choice of preferred social media strategy, professionals should do a quick self-diagnosis of their current, most natural online behavior. Do they value transparency and authenticity first and foremost? If they do, and thus post whatever comes to mind on social media, they embrace what we call an *Open* strategy. The key is to ensure that they understand this is risky. They might instead use a less risky *Audience* strategy, being careful to keep their professional and personal networks separate. For instance, an unreserved Facebook poster might learn to deflect friend requests from co-workers and professional contacts and direct them instead to a LinkedIn account. This not only avoids the danger of appearing unprofessional to colleagues but also the potential problem of seeming to speak as a representative of the employer. Individuals who adopt an *Audience* strategy, however, must be mindful that networks are fluid: people who begin as friends can later become co-workers, or even bosses - in which case, an *Audience* strategy can be compromised.

We heard from some professionals (and saw in a recent survey that 40% of respondents felt the same) that they feel compelled to accept friend requests from professional contacts. In that case, a *Content* strategy can be useful, which entails accepting these requests and resigning oneself to posting only carefully considered content. People who use this strategy post information and photos that project an image of professionalism, or at least do not undercut the reputation they are trying to earn with their boss, coworkers, and clients. The drawback with this strategy is of course that they can no longer vent or express vulnerability without a level of self-editing that may feel – and be perceived as – inauthentic. Even things they might consider innocuous to say in a work context could end up making waves if shared online.

It might not be obvious to everyone, but it is true: the more that posts are tailored to specific circles in a social world, the less risk there is that they will cause offense or embarrassment. Thus, for anyone willing to invest the time and effort, we recommend a more sophisticated strategy, the *Custom* strategy, in which social media users manage both their audience and their content. This is what Google+ was designed to facilitate. We also found people doing this on Facebook by creating two lists, one personal and another professional, and posting different content to these lists. Thus they safeguard their professional reputations while still maintaining an honest and lively Facebook identity. Custom strategies tend to be employed by journalists and public figures, who often set up distinct accounts to make absolutely clear when they are and aren't speaking in a professional capacity.

We come away from our study with a belief that most professionals would be best served by a Custom or a Content strategy. A Custom Strategy allows for richer relationships to be forged with peers through the sharing of information that goes beyond the strictly professional. At the same time, it saves the boss from seeing too many party and baby pictures, and spares friends all the job-related content that means nothing to them. However, you must have the capabilities to execute this Custom strategy effectively or else it could backfire. A Content strategy is the next best alternative that requires fewer capabilities, but may allow you to connect with a broad audience effectively.

But again, the important thing is for employees to make strategy choices for themselves - with their eyes open to the risks; with an understanding that no personal social media strategy is perfect; and with an awareness that context matters. Some industries are more formal than others; some organizational or country cultures may be more or less open to "letting it all hang out." Managers who think through their own social media strategies and put these topics on the table aren't hassling people, they're helping them. They're making it easier to avoid social media's troubles, and to access its treasures.

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Michael Kamleitner 2 years ago

Really enjoyed reading this article! It explains the challenge perfectly. It's always difficult to find the right balance when it comes to adopting a certain social media strategy. Transparency and authenticity are very important aspects but, as with everything, they can backfire when overdone. This reminds me of a funny article we wrote some time ago on brand interactions. You can read it here: <http://bit.ly/1xxJJGT>

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