

SOCIAL MEDIA CORPORATE GUIDELINES

December 2009

Managing Social Media Corporate Guidelines

There's a new wrinkle in the fabric of social media.

Clients love the power, immediacy and connectivity of interactive tools like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Blogs. Yet they worry about the loss of message control, bad publicity and potential legal action.

The rising blood pressure of company lawyers, HR directors and corporate communications departments is understandable. Never before have so many employees had the ability to “publish” their personal and business thoughts in so public an arena.

With corporate guidelines for social media, companies are trying to find the middle ground between fostering open employee-generated dialogue and gaffes that erode the corporate image—or worse. This white paper provides an examination of social media guidelines so that you can effectively harness the power of this new technology without driving your employees—or your lawyer—crazy.

The Main Issues

After talking with communications managers, lawyers and users, and reading a range of policies and guidelines, we have identified eight key areas for advice and oversight.

1. Be Open or Not

First and foremost, your company must decide if you will allow employees, beyond the corporate or marketing communications groups, to participate in company-related social media. The idea of employee-published communications can be frightening and, indeed, some business categories (think health care and government) have well-placed concerns. However, most companies should recognize that the playing field has changed and it may be better to put your employees in the game than have them warming the bench.

A great case in point is Microsoft. Not exactly renowned as an open company, this technology behemoth allowed—and even encouraged—employee Robert Scoble in 2005 to offer his personal opinions in his Blog “Scobleizer.” Although his opinions were occasionally critical, Robert helped humanize the face of Microsoft.

2. Be Transparent

Employees must use their real names, identify their roles in the company and be clear about vested interests. Some companies ask bloggers to state when they are delivering a personal opinion. For example, IBM asks employees who publish work-related comments via a public website, blog, tweet, etc to use a disclaimer like this:

“The posting on this site are my own and don’t necessarily represent IBM’s positions, strategies or opinions.”

The company must determine how to position employee comments. Are the comments personal? Do they represent or speak for the company?

3. Be Confidential

This might sound painfully obvious, but employees must not divulge confidential corporate, partner or customer’s proprietary information or plans.

4. Be Relevant

It is so easy to publish that one can forget that it is important to gauge the value of one’s thoughts before hitting the send button. Employee musings have an audience. Do they really deliver value? Do they move the conversation forward? This is a critical area worth managing. Educating employees that sometimes it’s better to pause and think before posting views is a good thing.

5. Be Legal

You don’t have to pass the bar to know that employees should not violate a company’s privacy, confidentiality and legal guidelines. They should also not comment on ongoing legal matters or litigation.

6. Be Nice

Nice is vastly underrated—especially in the social media milieu. Employees should respect their audience and not be offensive. No arguments, please. If there is a corporate Code of Conduct, they must follow it. The nature of social media is to be, well, social. So play nice and talk nice. There’s room for everyone and their thoughts in the digital sandbox.

7. Be Clear

Spell out your company’s expectations in respect to employee postings. Will you allow your employees to disagree with the company? As you can imagine, this could prove to be positive as well as harmful. How open do you really want to be?

8. Be Competitive?

Are employees allowed to discuss the competition? There are times when mentioning the competition is related to a discussion point. However, employees must be respectful and must avoid any hint of collusion as well.

The best in best practices.

Whether you're creating your own corporate social media guidelines or just getting the lay of the land, here is a list of helpful guidelines and practices that might help you better define your guidelines.

IBM Social Computing Guidelines: <http://www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html>

Intel Social Media Guidelines: http://www.intel.com/sites/sitewide/en_US/social-media.htm

Mayo Clinic: <http://sharing.mayoclinic.org/guidelines/for-mayo-clinic-employees/>

Wells Fargo Blogs: <http://blog.wellsfargo.com/community-guidelines.html>

Jaffe Associates (a very legal take and pre-written form):
http://www.jaffeassociates.com/pages/articles/view.php?article_id=330

Track the conversation.

In addition to keeping an eye on participating employee posts, we believe that it is imperative for the corporate communications group to track their company's overall Internet conversations. See what's being said in blogs, on Twitter and via the distribution of related videos.

There are both free and sophisticated paid tools that can help you listen. These tools range from free Google Alerts, Yahoo! Pipes and Twitter searches to affordable Viralheat to slightly more expensive Radian6.

Get professional help.

If you think that you need some advice on how to incorporate social media into your master plan—and, really, who doesn't?—give our president Peter Levitan a shout. He has been building social environments since the mid-nineties with industry-leading online forums, instant messaging tools and, most recently, Twitter and Facebook.

Peter can be reached at plevitan@citruspdx.com, at **541.550.4255** or as you might expect, on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

For more thinking, go to citrusbegin.com/whitepapers.