

Understanding Social Media and Using it to Boost Your Career

In today's world of modern technology, even our social interactions and presence has crossed over to the digital world. Instead of calling someone to wish them a happy birthday, or even more outlandish, sending them a birthday card via the U.S. Postal Service, we now post a happy birthday message on their Facebook wall. And old colleagues we may have once been too intimidated by to even say hello in the hallway are now approachable as we send them a "connect" request through LinkedIn. As Drew Barrymore's character in "He's Just Not That Into You" lamented, there are so many social media outlets available now that just keeping up with your different accounts is nearly impossible! As you begin your job search, or just aim to keep yourself on an upward trajectory with your current employer, there are some rules of the game to play by with regard to your social media accounts.

Networking to Find New Opportunities

Some things never change and the principal of networking and using who you know to your advantage in your career search remains the same. Though there are more social networking sites than I could even begin to list, I'm going to focus on three main social media sites: LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

LinkedIn is likely the most important place to make your presence known in the working world. Make sure your profile is complete with current work information, an updated photo (keep this professional, obviously, and headshot only) and as many identifying factors that can help you connect as possible. This means adding your high school, college and graduate schools as well as every professional job you've held, organizations you have been or currently are a part of, and a link to your Twitter account (which I'll cover in more detail). After your profile is complete, you can sign up to follow companies which you are interested in, including your current company, and stay up to date on what is happening with each of them. You can also ask current or past colleagues to write a recommendation of your work to post on your profile, which is a great way to highlight your skill set in a less biased way. LinkedIn also has a great arsenal of job postings, which you can tailor to fit your needs. Lastly, make sure to join LinkedIn groups which appeal to your background and preferred opportunities. For example, you could join alumni groups, career groups for like-minded professionals, and philanthropic causes that you support. It is best to not join groups affiliated with any religious or political ties as your LinkedIn profile should not reveal anything that you would not reveal on your professional resume or in a job interview. And we all know the legal marketplace rules are similar to Dating 101: never discuss religion or politics on a first date (or in this case, a job interview).

Facebook may seem a less likely place to network for a job, but you'd be surprised how helpful your otherwise questionable friends can be! Of course, Facebook is a less buttoned up version of you so you may not be as naturally cautious as you would be on LinkedIn, but we'll get to those rules later on. One great way to get out the word that you're looking for a **new position** on Facebook is to change your status to let your friends know that you are looking for a specific type of new job in a particular city. Often times your friends will respond and get you in touch with someone who may be of assistance. I did this in my own **career search** a few years ago and was overwhelmed by the help that poured in from people who I otherwise would refer to as purely a "Facebook friend" and may not have spoken to in months. If you are friends with your colleagues or your boss on Facebook, you will have to handle this differently. You can target specific people and create a group out of those contacts; this way you won't be sharing information with people who you don't want to see it.

Twitter may not be as helpful in searching for a new job, but a quick tweet about what you're looking for certainly can't hurt (again, provided you don't have a current employer or co-worker following you). In general, it is great to stay active on Twitter and cross-post your tweets on LinkedIn. By tweeting industry news and staying fresh in the mind of your followers, you will keep an active network.

The most important part of your social media network, regardless of the medium, is to build your network and stay active in it. If you only use these accounts when you need something, they aren't going to work as well for you. Instead, if you are a frequent poster (though not an abuser) and try to help others when they use their networks to bolster their career, you will see more return. And hey, good karma is never a bad thing!

Managing Your Connections

This rule is similar to the school of thought that the best employees manage their bosses, which also means those being managed don't necessarily know it. For Facebook, it is important to use the privacy controls and group settings. Above all, make sure that your Facebook account is only visible to those people you have confirmed as your friends. The percentage of employers who check Facebook accounts now is staggering and you don't want them seeing photos of you dressed up in your less than office-appropriate Halloween costume or a status update about sleeping one off at your desk. So take the initiative and create groups for your status updates to go to and make your photos visible only to those who you want to see them.

You also have the ability to manage what others post on your Facebook wall and you should stay on top of this. Delete anything that you feel is inappropriate and, if necessary, set controls whereby your contacts need your permission before doing things like posting on your wall or tagging you in a photo. Of course, if you are not friends with anyone in your professional network and have privacy controls intact, this is less important, but it is still good to monitor.

Along with managing your contacts comes the task of determining who is and who is not an appropriate contact. My rule of thumb is to keep co-workers as contacts on my LinkedIn account but not as Facebook friends. My LinkedIn account is always professional and there is nowhere for a friend to leak information about a job search or some other inappropriate-for-work news. You'll have to assess the situation on your own and it certainly would be awkward to deny a friend request from your boss, so be sure to change privacy settings with contacts where appropriate.

LinkedIn and Twitter need less monitoring on the connections aspect. For the most part, I wouldn't worry about managing those connections. If anything, I would be over-inclusive with LinkedIn because you never know who will prove to be a helpful contact. The only issue, as previously mentioned, is having current colleagues on your LinkedIn account and then advertising your job search. This is where individual messages to contacts becomes very useful, so be sure to take stock of all your contacts before posting what may be job-sensitive information.

Keeping Your Accounts Appropriate

After you've gone through and managed your contacts to make sure they don't ruin your solid gold reputation, it's up to you to keep your own accounts perfect and shiny. As a legal recruiter, I can personally attest that I search for all my new candidates on LinkedIn and Facebook to make sure their accounts are in good shape and I'm astounded at some of the things I see. Believe me, potential employers (and even some current employers) will be doing the same searches. Here are a few guidelines for keeping your accounts professional:

If you are currently employed, make sure that news of your job search isn't directly getting back to your employer or colleagues. If you are connected to any co-workers on any social media sites, this means setting up special groups, carefully crafting your LinkedIn updates and not tweeting about how badly you want out of your current gig.

If you are not employed, you don't need to be as careful about the above issues. However, potential employers will try to look at your social media accounts, so it is crucial that you keep them appropriate and professional, and private where necessary.

Never say negative things about your current job. Although it may get a good laugh on Facebook to talk about how outrageous your boss is, no future employer will want to hire you if they think you will badmouth them in the same manner.

Consider having separate Twitter accounts if you like to tweet funny or potentially unprofessional content. You can link your more professional Twitter to your LinkedIn profile to continue having an active online presence and keep contacts engaged. Your personal one should be closely monitored so that only approved followers have access, but that way you can still have an outlet for those your humorous observations that have attracted so many followers in the first place.

Be careful about posting too frequently during business hours. Employers don't want to hire someone who spends their time on the clock doing non-work related activities. Quick posts to reach people during their business day (when they are looking for a distraction from their own work) is okay, but be conscious.

Ways to Improve your Social Media Accounts

Alright, now you've set up your accounts, perfected your profiles, managed your contacts and kept your accounts looking squeaky clean. Why would anyone want to look at them now? In order to keep people engaged and make sure they are getting your messages and growing your network, there are some things you can do to bolster your efforts in networking.

For all of the social media outlets, the number one thing you can do is stay active on your accounts. Post articles that may interest others (again, avoiding topics like politics and religion), keep your updates positive, participate in group conversations, "like" other poster's comments, re-tweet relevant messages, and just make sure you are engaging your contacts. As mentioned before, take care not to be an over-poster or too active during work hours, but regular activity is a great way to stay connected.

If you are able to keep a blog that is professional and potentially of interest to your network, keep it up to date and make sure to have your social media accounts automatically update anytime you make a new post or entry. Again, only do this if it is professional enough for networking.

Lastly, consistency is crucial for your social media accounts. No, that doesn't mean that you have to post your Facebook profile picture of your dog in his reindeer antlers on your LinkedIn page, but you do need to make sure anywhere you have information listed about your job history, job title, years of employment, education and other similar information, you keep it consistent. It would cause questions for a potential employer if your title was different or years of employment varied on your own social media pages, so make sure all the information lines up.

Conclusion

For all the times your friends rolled their eyes at you tweeting at the dinner table or trolling away on Facebook, you can now be confident that your efforts were not wasted! Social media is becoming a mainstream means of communication and you don't want to miss out on a potential outlet to further your career. So, follow these easy guidelines and as Tim Gunn always says, "Make It Work."