

Be careful out there.

Walking across the minefield that is social media.

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In recent years, social media sites, as they are known, have become increasingly popular. Facebook (www.facebook.com) is a prime example of a 'social media' site. Others are Twitter (www.twitter.com), LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), and MySpace (www.myspace.com). The concept of most of these sites is rather simple: a user registers for a profile on the site, and inputs certain information about themselves. Sites like LinkedIn are geared more towards professional networking, so the information focus is more along the lines of education, positions held, speaking engagements and published works, and the like. Sites such as Facebook and MySpace are inherently personal in nature, focusing more on friendship and family. On Facebook, after registering for a profile, a user can then locate people that he or she knows who may also have a profile on the site. Depending on that person's privacy settings, the user most likely has to "invite" the other person into their network, or ask to become their "friend." If the recipient accepts the request, the two become connected. Typically, from that point forward, each of them can then view whatever has been posted to each other's profile, which may include text, pictures, videos, or comments from that person's other "friends." On Twitter, however, "following" someone doesn't automatically mean that the other person is "following" you. That person would have to specifically follow you in return in order to view your "Tweets," because the connection is not automatically reciprocal.

Although these sites are only viewable online via an internet-connected computer or device, what some people (at least in my opinion based on my participation on such sites) don't seem to understand (or care about) is that posting content on these sites, without the proper precautions and common sense, is no different than standing on the 50 yard line at halftime around a packed crowd, broadcast cameras running, and saying the same things. In other words, everyone's watching. What's more? The internet never forgets. Once you post it, consider it irrevocably out there for everyone to see. Even if your posts are restricted to only those with whom you are "friends" (a very loosely used term, since on some profiles I've seen people amass thousands of "friends") they can still see it, print it, or "retweet" (on Twitter) it to others. For sites crawled and indexed by Google, once it's indexed, it may even be available online even after the original post is gone, depending on when and how often Google indexes and caches that specific site.

At a recent industry group seminar that I gave, I outlined several examples of social media use gone awry. Here is a small sampling, all from a brief search on Google:

- In September 2004 a Delta Airlines flight attendant was fired just weeks after she posted allegedly inappropriate pictures of herself (in uniform) to her blog site.

- In February 2009 a juror in Arkansas posted comments about one of the parties, a building materials supplier, to Twitter using his cell phone. The Court was asked to overturn the \$12+ million judgment against the company due to the juror's posts. The Court denied to overturn the verdict, but the case is now up on appeal because of the juror's "Tweets."
- In March 2009, a defendant was acquitted on a weapons possession charge after the police officer who chased him down (and who the defendant accused of planting the weapon on him) posted certain comments on Facebook.
- In June 2009 an Indiana State Police Trooper resigned after being investigated for using Facebook to publicly brag about heavy drinking, and after posting photographs of not only a banged-up police car, but also a fellow officer holding a gun to his head.

I'm sure if you scour the internet you can find more and more examples of these types of situations. What people need to consider, and be keenly aware of, is the medium being used and the widespread reach of the content. On blog sites in particular, content is usually available online immediately after posting, totally unrestricted, and quickly indexed by the search engines.

As a general rule, Florida companies and organizations should implement acceptable use and online social media policies, and should closely monitor official company groups set up on social media sites.

Ultimately, individuals should be aware of time, place, and manner considerations in their posts, and think twice before pressing that submit button. After all, the use of common sense should go a long way.

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