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# What is a Social Media Policy and Why You Would Need One

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## Introduction/Executive Summary

People are using social media whether you like it or not and they are using it at work. The quicker your organization embraces Social Media the better your chances for Social Media benefiting your companies efforts online. It is estimated that 1.2 billion users worldwide -- 82% of the world's internet population over the age of 15 -- now log on to a social networks (The New Age, Science & Technology, December 26, 2011 - [http://www.thenewage.co.za/38836-1021-53-Social\\_networking\\_is\\_the\\_most\\_popular\\_online\\_activity](http://www.thenewage.co.za/38836-1021-53-Social_networking_is_the_most_popular_online_activity)) By creating empowering guidelines and policies you can utilizes the resource to the benefit of the organization, while protecting many of the legal implications.

Some examples of how Social Media affect an organization every day include:

Take for instance, Tim in HR, he is reviewing applicants Facebook page prior to hiring them – do you know the legal ramifications on your organization for doing this?

How about your sales team is going to use Linked in for business development, how do you want their profile to look? Is there sales scripts you would like to see them using when communicating with these prospects?

How about Susanne the secretary who is tweeting all day long, what if she accidentally shares a confidential piece of information that your organization was not going to launch until next months industry tradeshow?

What about the support staff who spend their morning coffee time surfing Facebook, do you care what they are saying? What if their post could ultimately benefit the organization?

Does your customer service department utilize social media listening software to manage your online reputation and customer service?

Lastly, how does your marketing department handle the branding for your organization through Social Media? Are they using the best strategies to maximize and protect shareholder profitability?

As much as we hope that our team can manage themselves and know how to keep to the straight and narrow, you never know what you are going to get when it comes to their online presence and how they communicate digitally.



Organizations will often work with professionals to draft a social media policy as the company's first line of defense to mitigate risk for both employer and employee. You might have an employee agreement or a standards manual or a confidentiality agreement but those might not be enough. While you may have language in these documents to address employee interactions on social media sites, there is a need for additional documentation. It can be in an organizations best interest to create a separate social media policy. This provides something specific on file and accessible to employees and that they are aware of the policies existence and how to govern themselves accordingly.

## What is a Social Media Policy?

Look at the Social Media Policy as a playbook for the team to execute on, rather than a set of rules that they must obey. These plays assist the team members in executing on various tasks as they involve their professional and personal involvement in Social Media. Therefore, a Social Media Policy should include “plays” that address some of the following areas:

- Employee Code of Conduct for Online Communications
- Employee Code of Conduct for Company Representation in Online Communications
- Employee Blogging Disclosure Policy
- Employee LinkedIn Policy
- Corporate Blogging Policy
- Corporate Conduct for Online Communication
- Company Password Policy

When drafting the Social Media Policy, an organization should focus on drafting guidelines within which the team can play. Not strict rules of what cannot be done. If you create plays for your team to operate within, they will be more likely to run the plays your create assuming the plays have a balance of professional and personal ideals, by allowing the action to occur within a fair set of guidelines that respect the person, as well as, the organization.

When drafting these various documents, there are certain aspects of Social Media that it is important to keep in mind as to their policies:

1. The Policy should discuss a balance between the company's interest and what is in it for the team member. Social Media is a two way street that requires give and take and a Policy should embrace this.



2. Be Authentic because people want to trust you and what you have to say, do not give them a reason to not listen or they will leave just as quick as they came.

3. The Policy should explain the community that is being created and the way in which the organization is seeking to a culture in the online community. The culture of the community will depend upon the goals of the social media strategy.

4. The Policy should discuss how to address certain aspects of your communication, as it is important to remember who your audience is on the various Social Media Platforms.

5. The Policy should provide basic responsibility. You remember when your mother used to tell you before you do something, ask yourself three questions:

- Will it hurt me?
- Will it hurt someone else?
- Will I get in trouble?

Remember, no one wants to be “Dooxed.” (“Dooxed” is an Internet expression that means to lose one’s job because of things one says on one’s website or blog.)

6. The Policy should explain that the company can and will monitor use of Social Media and Social Networking web sites, even if they are engaging away from the office. At the end of the day, a team member should use good judgment whether the employee’s comments relate directly to their employer or not.

7. The Policy needs to address Copyright and Fair Use. The last thing that your organization wants is to be caught up in a Intellectual Property matter because credit was not given where it was due.

8. One of the most important parts of the Policy is to protect confidential & proprietary information. Creating a community with trusted and authentic communication does not mean giving away trade secrets or providing the “inside scoop” on the recent happenings of the company. Employees who share confidential or proprietary information do so at the risk of losing their job and possibly even ending up a defendant in a civil lawsuit.

9. The Policy needs to define ways in which the communication that occurs with the community that is developed brings value and is interesting.

10. The Policy should seek to create a balance for the use of Social Media for personal reasons and its use for company matters. It is also important to understand that at times team members will use a personal Social Media account/ profile to communicate for a company matter and it is important that the Policy addresses these situations.



## Why a Social Media Policy?

Now that you understand what a Social Media Policy is and what it is used for it is important to understand why it is necessary. Another way to look at a Social Media Policy is as a roadmap for your team to follow as they travel down the road. Without a map you do not know where you are going or how to get there. More importantly most likely you will get lost, which can end up costing you time and money and could possibly get you in danger or jeopardize things that are very valuable to you.

This is why it is important to create a guidelines which govern staffs usage of social media at work, staff's usage of company's social media platforms and staff's input of information and content for use on the company's social media platforms. As you create this roadmap, it will also be important to properly train in each of these areas. Training can ultimately affect the corporate culture of the organization, the sales cycle for business development and customer service efforts.

For example, in regards to sales, Social Media is proved to directly impact the buying habits of the staff's friends and family. The benefit to the organization is that the staff's social media efforts will create increased revenues, as customers are over 50% more likely to buy the brands they follow or are a fan (Social Media Examiner, December 8, 2011). With a properly crafted Social Media Policy and training for your staff, you will create a word of mouth campaign that your team will be excited about and will result in viral marketing for your company. The reason this will work is that when your team starts speaking about the company its products and services in a favorable manner, this will ultimately creates trusted and authentic communication. This trusted and authentic communication will turn into peer reviews and recommendations, which lead to increased sales. According to the study conducted by The Nielsen Company, participated in by approximately 25,000 respondents from 50 countries, 90% of consumers surveyed noted that they trust recommendations from people they know, while 70% trusted consumer opinions posted online.

As the policy is created and the staff is properly trained, the end result will be a team that is engaged in social media and has an interest in the organization's efforts. At the end of the day, your own team can be one of your biggest proponents of your company's efforts online if you get them engaged and interested in what is happening with the organization digitally.



In conclusion, Social Media is not a fad and it is affecting and will continue to affect the way we do business. It is important for organizations to not only accept this, but to also embrace it with a solid digital solution that include a creative strategy and a encompassing policy. As much as we hope that our team can manage themselves and know how to keep to the straight and narrow, you never know what you are going to get when it comes to their online presence and how they communicate digitally. Take the time to work with a professional to draft your Social Media Policy as maintaining a competitive edge in today's digitally driven marketplace requires an active strategy including intellectual property, and social media. Ultimately, entrepreneurs and companies can increase public recognition, distinguish their identities, products and services through strategic digital solutions, all the while safeguarding their digital assets and valuable proprietary rights.

Michael S. Melfi JD/ MBA founder and owner of Melfi & Associates PC. Melfi and Associates is a Sports and Entertainment Law Firm specializing in Cyber and Social Media Law. For more information contact Michael S. Melfi at [Michael@melfiassociates.com](mailto:Michael@melfiassociates.com).