

## **Work and social media: Striking a balance**

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By Deborah L. Cohen

CHICAGO (Reuters.com) - From Twitter to Facebook, social media is quickly becoming entrenched in the workplace. How to deal with that reality is a question that more managers are facing and some say acceptance is the first best step.

Striking a healthy balance for the use of social media at work means creating expectations for appropriate behavior, say small business owners and others responsible for policy.

"It's free to get started and anybody can do it," says Chris Boudreaux, the creator of [socialmediagovernance.com](http://socialmediagovernance.com), a website that is aggregating data about corporate social media policy to aid business leaders in managing social media use at their companies.. "You're really in a position where you need to support these people ... rather than fight the tide."

In many cases, the work regulations dictating interaction in the fast-changing world of virtual communities appear to be a reflection of overall corporate culture, Boudreaux, a product development specialist, says.

His site has collected information on more than 80 organizations, including companies such as Cisco Systems, FedEx, and Microsoft, as well as universities, hospitals and other nonprofits. Often companies are taking a reactive approach "to protect themselves against a potential downside," says Boudreaux.

It's clear why when news of abuse abounds. Among the most disturbing was an incident at Domino's Pizza in April. The restaurant chain faced a public relations crisis after employees at a Conover, N.C. location decided to film a prank replete with health code violations and post it on the video-sharing site YouTube.

But despite such concerns, the businesses that may prove most successful in leveraging social media for sales development, marketing, education and informational purposes may be those that take a proactive approach to the benefits of use rather than erecting barriers, Boudreaux says.

Small companies, often recognized for their lack of bureaucracy and adaptable nature, may be particularly adept at gleaning the valuable contacts and other business resources that online communities offer. To do so, they are emphasizing acceptable uses of social media in the workplace.

"I am encouraged that people understand how to use it," says Larry Burns, CEO of StartSampling Inc., a Carol Stream, Illinois-based digital marketing services company that develops Internet campaigns offering free samples on behalf of consumer companies. "If (employees) are involved in the creation of promotional activities for our customers, they need to understand what this space is."

StartSampling has updated its corporate handbook to include social media guidelines and holds regular seminars for its 55 employees on topics such as maintaining the confidentiality of client information when interacting online. Sales people are expected to participate in communities such as LinkedIn.

"It's a balance, a difficult balance," says Burns, noting concerns about liability amid the free flow of information. "Most organizations are already

not in control of this. My suggestion would be to educate folks as to what is and is not appropriate behavior."

## POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Sharlyn Lauby, president of Internal Talent Management, a Ft. Lauderdale, Florida-based human resources consulting firm, believes in positive reinforcement. In many cases, other standards for communication at a company, such as those that govern personal use of the telephone and email, can lay a foundation, she says.

"Instead of talking about all the things you can't do - talk about what you can do," Lauby says. "It's about talking with people and engaging in conversation. Train your employees."

Andy Dunn, the 30-year-old CEO of Bonobos, a New York-based online start-up dedicated to selling men's pants on the Internet, allows his staff to self-regulate social media use, which has been critical to the company's development.

Dunn doesn't fret if employees, who often work long hours, use downtime to check in with their friends on Facebook; it becomes readily apparent who is spending too much time on personal pursuits if work results fall short of expectations.

"We're actually encouraging the use of these tools," he says. "We communicate with our customers on Facebook and Twitter all the time."

Bonobos is not alone. Fresh data from a survey conducted by the business-oriented Web directory Business.com suggests that small to mid-sized companies may be outpacing their larger-company rivals in the use of social media to search for and find business-related information.

The poll, concluded in September and not yet released, included the participation of respondents from 2,264 North American businesses with fewer than 100 employees, says Business.com's Ben Hanna, vice president of marketing.

"Small business are always under pressure to find ways to compete, to find ways of gathering information," he says. "They're more open to new ways of communicating, new ways of doing research, new information sources that may help them do more in less time."

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