

Social Media: Professional Networking do's and don'ts
David C. Thompson and Kerry Boehner
May 2010

On an unprecedented scale individuals are contributing personal information online. Given that much of this information is tagged, archived and fully searchable, it is imperative that users of these public forums realize this and manage themselves appropriately. This is especially true for participation on professional networking sites. In the current economic climate where we approach an era of 'Brand Me', it is crucial that a potential employee presents a unified, professional, and responsible digital persona to prospective employers.

In addition, existing employees of an organization bear the responsibility, if only by association, of representing their current company. With each post, to some extent, they help shape the external image of their employer. In this note we will focus primarily on professional networking forums such as LinkedIn, and Plaxo, but much of this material is generally applicable to all Social Media platforms. These are our personal opinions and not those of our employers.

General Protocol

- Assume that everything you contribute online, on a site such as LinkedIn, is indexed, archived, and searchable. It becomes, like never before, a record of your thoughts, opinion, and participation. Treat discussions and forum posts as static records of your communication style, an indication of how you structure an argument, and how you respond to criticism or an alternate view point. You cannot simply think of this as a one-on-one discussion with the individual you are responding to. Take your time, ensure correct spelling and grammar, and never write anything in haste or anger. *When in doubt, don't.*
- Know your audience. It is likely a lot larger than you think. Depending upon the social media platform, and your individual settings, all of your contacts can be notified should you post something in a discussion forum or within a group setting. Your seemingly focused discussion has a remarkably broad audience which will invariably contain both past, and possibly future, **employers**.

Profile

- Include a suitable, professional picture. The picture should be a recognizable and complimentary picture of you and should contain no significant others, animals, or children.
- Your information is online, use it. Take advantage of vanity URLs to share this information in static documents you may share routinely with others (your resume, CV or whitepapers for instance). This is a good way of giving potential employers an opportunity to find out more about you.
- Your information is online, own it. If you blog, microblog, have a personal website, or some other online presence connect these to your professional profile. However, do this only if what you post maintains your professional 'brand'. It's okay to have a personal Twitter account for friends and family, but you don't need to link it to your professional online presence just because you can.

Connections

- Professional networking sites allow users to manage connections and contacts. These sites are not job boards. While hiring managers may be disproportionately represented within

these communities, this is not the place to ask them for anything more than information or advice.

- Use the Graph. Most of these sites allow you to see your place in the 'Social Graph'. Take advantage of this. Unless they are a 1st degree connection, do not directly contact a manager; go through a 2nd degree connection. Have this mutual connection introduce you. Try this through people who know you well as they will likely say positive things about their previous experience(s) with you.
- Do not 'collect' connections. This is not a race, and there is no prize for the person who can amass the largest number of them. Grow your network in an organic way, building manageable and meaningful relationships as you go.
- In inviting someone to join your network, don't simply rely on the standard invitation form. Use the invitation to remind the connection who you are, and why they would want to be connected to you. This will set you apart.

Discussions

- Treat all contributions to a discussion thread courteously. While it may not seem like it at the time there is no such thing as 'bad advice'. Even in the case that you have considered an issue from many perspectives, it never hurts to thank someone for their viewpoint. This will build a rapport, and facilitate a discussion which may then move in an unexpected and mutually beneficial direction; something that would not have been possible had you simply disregarded a seemingly obvious contribution. Politeness costs nothing, and this age old dictum is especially true online. *Remember the Golden Rule: treat others as you wish to be treated.*
- Never get personal online and do not get dragged into tit-for-tat discussions. Take it off line. Communicate outside of the forum, via email for instance, should you feel passionately enough to continue to debate this point. As soon as you enter into a personal discussion online you allow someone else to begin to manage your brand and your message. Do not allow this to happen.

Groups

- This is one of the best features of LinkedIn – find professional and personal groups where you can learn more about specific areas and offer expertise to those who are new to your field of expertise.

Updates & Comments

- Use status updates appropriately. This is not Facebook. While in job search mode, avoid such updates as 'need a job now!' Perhaps a more useful phrase would be 'Actively seeking new positions in the pharmaceutical industry'.
- Other people's information is online, use it. There is no excuse for going into any sort of interview without knowing something about your interviewer. It is highly likely that their information will be available in some form online, find it; do your due diligence and use that edge.

Recommendations

- Do not solicit recommendations. If you have asked, it means nothing. The next time you see someone with a large number of recommendations see how many of those are

'symmetric' (Alice recommends Bob, Bob recommends Alice). Oftentimes social pressure is behind the recommendation, and what you'll actually read is generic at best.

- Remember that giving a recommendation is as much a statement about you as it is the recipient. Ensure correct spelling and grammar, and personalize the recommendation such that it speaks as much to your professionalism as to the recipients.

In conclusion, sites like LinkedIn are a great marketing tool for any professional (especially as the workforce moves toward more consulting and contracting work.) Critically look at your profile from an outsider's perspective (or better yet – have a colleague do this and provide constructive feedback). These online forums are a place to highlight your skills, experiences, and goals – be sure that your profile and presence conveys what you want the world to know.

The authors' contact information and social media profiles can be found here:

www.unhub.com/dcthompson

www.kobsolutions.com