

# Social Media Etiquette: Communicate Behavioral Expectations

**Author: Heidi Russell Rafferty**

John Sands sees it all the time—and you probably have, too: Someone comes into a meeting and immediately flips open a laptop, BlackBerry and pager. During the discussion, the phone sounds off with a full blast of music, the clackety-clack of the keyboard is incessant white noise, and the pager beeps without abandon.

“The whole meeting goes off kilter. Everyone is now distracted. One phone call can take out everyone—not just the one person who is grabbing the phone, exiting the room. You have to get everyone focused back in to where you were,” says Sands, director of compensation for Virtua in Marlton, N.J.

“If I could wave my magic wand, there would be a basic etiquette standard that we could share or at least decide to agree to in part or whole,” he adds.

Etiquette gurus agree, though, that there is not a one-size-fits-all “standard” for the scratch-your-chin questions on proper social media behavior at work. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing, says John Putzier, author of *Weirdos in the Workplace: The New Normal—Thriving in the Age of the Individual* (FT Press, 2004).

“Traditional managers want [to have] a policy and be done with it, and that’s not realistic and effective,” Putzier says. “Your whole philosophy should be, ‘It depends.’ ”

The ultimate test is whether each person is able to meet their objectives on the job. “If you’re really good at what you do and are knocking the ball out of the park, I’m going to be a little more forgiving,” Putzier says. “HR bristles at this, but you can discriminate based on performance.” On the flip side, if the person is dropping the ball and is obviously using social media sites frequently, it’s time to have a chat, he adds.

## Mind Your Manners

Here are ways to guide your workforce through the mores of social media:

Set ground rules on day one of employment, says Nancy Mitchell, owner of The Etiquette Advocate Inc., in Washington, D.C. The firm helps corporations, organizations, schools and individuals master social etiquette, business and international protocol, and dining etiquette skills.

“Instead of scolding them, coach people for success. Do it early enough. A new supervisor needs to say, ‘Here’s what we expect with social media.’ Give all the guidance you can so that they can be successful. You could say, ‘I noticed today you were texting while the PowerPoint was going on. That doesn’t go down well here. It’s offensive to people in this industry and this office.’ ”

Compare etiquette standards of the past to today’s dilemma. Or, advise employees to err on the side of formality, Mitchell says. Draw parallels between other workplace no-nos and social media gaffes.

In the past, many people would never make a personal phone call on a company telephone, Putzier says. But today they have no problem sending personal text messages from their cell phones.

Another example: Office meetings used to be held exclusively in the workplace, and everyone gave their full attention. Today, the sounds in a telecommuter's home might invade the meeting while he or she does the dishes or shushes a barking dog. Ask workers attending meetings remotely to use headsets that mute the noise from home activity.

### **Not Cut and Dried**

Realize that even your employees are confused.

A recent survey on online office etiquette by Liberty Mutual's Responsibility Project found that 73 percent of people think it's unacceptable to update a Facebook page or read a blog unrelated to their duties while at work. However, 66 percent believe checking personal e-mail is acceptable at work. When asked to identify the most unacceptable online activity at work, 82 percent said uploading a personal photo to a social media profile.

Nathan Lump, managing editor of the Responsibility Project, notes, "One thing this suggests is that there is a certain lack of clarity on the part of employees about what's acceptable and what is not. The conclusion is that companies might want to establish policies or engage in a dialogue about this."

This can get sticky if your company relies on Facebook and Twitter for marketing and sales. Some employees need to be on those sites to do their jobs. Just communicate clearly about appropriate usage to those team members, Lump says.

As for being "friends" with a boss on Facebook?

"It's not appropriate for a boss to ask a subordinate," Mitchell says. "An employee doesn't have to say yes. [However], if the boss is already a personal friend, the kind that does things with you outside of work, that's different."

Heidi Russell Rafferty is a freelance writer and editor in Kentucky. She can be reached at [www.theobjectivejournalist.com](http://www.theobjectivejournalist.com).

Published: 3/24/10