

## Social Media and the B-School

**Interactive digital and social media** have become popular tools for business schools wanting to build their reputations, yet these tools are dual-edged swords. They can harm the school's reputation when individuals create personal sites full of information that doesn't fit the school's brand.

Sometimes these errant individuals are faculty and administrators. But most often they're students, who don't always understand that an item they post today—whether they think it's funny, helpful, or justified—might prove to be an embarrassment to their school as well as a liability to themselves down the road.

Without trampling on the tenets of free speech, schools need to help students think about the impact of their social media postings. But administrators also must protect the school's brand by managing uncontrolled social media sites. They should set clear expectations about social media, while also preparing plans of action should these expectations not be met.

### Trouble Sites

Online communications most often go astray through two popular tools:

#### ■ Social networking sites.

Plenty of disasters can happen when students use sites like Facebook and Twitter. While some schools set up their own social networking sites, particularly for students who have just been accepted, many independent Facebook and Google groups do not have any administrative oversight.

Recently, two second-year students

at one school used a social networking site to comment on the quality of reading assignments and textbooks for a particular class. One of the posters said a certain book should be read only if the incoming student was having trouble falling asleep. Another recommended that new students skip purchasing the book altogether, going straight to QuickMBA.com to get the basics. Later this student even posted notes from QuickMBA—which was most likely a legal violation of the site's ownership rights.

Perhaps these students believed they were mentors providing the kind of advice they would offer in face-to-face chats. What's problematic is that they used a public forum that was accessible by outsiders. The postings could have made incoming students, or their parents, doubt the teacher's ability and judgment. They could have made recruiters wonder about the usefulness of this course—or the program.

In short, these comments tainted the school's reputation. Even if these students weren't concerned about that outcome, they should be concerned about the extrapolation: If their school's reputation suffers, their MBA degree is devalued.

■ **Blogs.** Millions of people maintain blogs, and that includes CEOs, professors, and students, many of whom don't realize how much power their words have. For example, a business student at one school wrote an unflattering blog about a year-long required project that involved outreach to a large corporation. Although her negative comments were more about the project than the company, executives were not pleased

when they learned about her blog. The official company response was, "We are not sure we are prepared to risk that type of a disclosure with potentially disaffected students."

Unfortunately, the program director was developing a large-scale project with two key partners—a project that was stopped in its tracks after the blogging incident.

It turned out that this same student had written a previous blog post while she was actually sitting in the core finance class, despite rules against blogging in class. In another post, she noted that she comprehended very little in this finance class, but she still received a final grade of B+.

This student definitely had the right to post this message, just as she had the right to share this opinion in conversation with her friends. But in this new world of social networking, she also must be encouraged to consider the larger implications of her blog—that it may give an undeserved negative impression to employers about the level of her skills and the quality of her education.

### Rules of Netiquette

While the laws surrounding social media sites are still being defined, business schools need to make it clear what they expect from students using social media. The situations above might have been prevented if the schools in question had expressed expectations like these:

**Postings should not depict or describe potentially offensive conduct.** It would seem obvious that no one should post photos of students or faculty in compromising situations, particularly at an event sponsored by the academic institution. Nor should anyone blog or tweet about bad student or faculty

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behavior. But often students see no harm in posting about such “fun” events. Administrators must be sure students understand that such postings could harm the school’s brand and the students’ own professional images.

**Students should consider the true implications of “freedom of speech.”** Most students cherish their right to post what they like on their personal social networking pages. But schools should help students understand that their online postings are not the same as their face-to-face conversations. What they “say” online lasts indefinitely, so it’s important that they put their words to their own simple tests *before* they post. *Will the professor be unfairly portrayed by this comment? Is it an accurate representation of the course and my school? Will my classmates be offended? Would I want corporate recruiters to know this about me before they meet me?* By asking questions such as these, students can better predict the negative consequences of a comment or photo before they post it.

**Postings should pass the “public versus anonymous” acid test.** Social media potentially can be accessed by millions of readers, and Internet exchanges are never anonymous. ISPs can be tracked, company e-mail systems can be monitored, friends can reveal the identity of a blog’s author. Writers should always ask themselves

if they want their names attached to a posting for the entire world to see. If they don’t, they shouldn’t put the item online.

**Personal social media comments should be posted only via private Internet service providers.** Students should understand that anything posted via the university’s server may blur the line between a personal posting and university governance.

### Spreading the Word

To convey their netiquette expectations, school might use a session at orientation to discuss with students both the positive and negative aspects of social media postings. Or perhaps the school could include social media expectations with acceptance packets, honor code information, or class syllabi. At the same time, administrators don’t want to come across as the social media police or the enemies of free speech.

No matter how clear a school is about its netiquette rules, it needs to have a plan in place for how it will handle situations in which embarrassing content appears on social media sites. The severity of the responses should be determined by how harmful a posting is to the school’s relationships with stakeholders. For instance, a student might simply be asked to “take down” the photos he posted of his professor’s cigar and Jägermeister party. More punitive measures might be called for when a student’s online rants about a class project lead to a corporation withdrawing its support.

And let’s be clear—students aren’t the only ones who post questionable items. Administrators need guidelines to tell them when a professor’s unfortunate blog post-

ing merits only a reprimand and when it might result in termination. Some people might wonder if harsh punitive measures violate freedom of speech laws, but there is a swelling rank of employees who have lost their jobs over personal posts. In any case, it’s important that the school have a plan in place for dealing with indiscreet postings.

### New Digital World

Educators have long understood that there must be policies with respect to academic dishonesty. Recently, programs have focused on core values and asked students to acknowledge these values when they become members of the academic community. Yet few business schools include proper social media behaviors among their lists of core values.

But it’s a new world now. This technology is engrained in the lives of our students. If business schools don’t create and share expectations about social media usage, they risk being harmed by uncontrolled information. Schools should encourage students to take part in the exciting social networking culture that is emerging online. But schools need to help students and faculty understand the kind of impact that thoughtless social media postings can have—and they need to let the whole community know that when such indiscretions turn hateful or harmful, there will be repercussions. ■

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