Social Media and the Young Professional

Social media has become an important part of our life. Many people cannot go a day without checking updates on their favorite social media accounts. They offer us an opportunity to connect, to inform others, and to be privy to what others are doing at that exact moment. Social media platforms, now available directly at our fingertips via mobile media, allow us to explore those opportunities instantly. Networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter are resources that can be used to our advantage, to enhance our connections with other people and events, whether they are professional or personal. But the question we face is: how should we best use social media tools to complement professional connections, and not undermine them?

Among the dozens of platforms that exist, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are the three most widely known and commonly used for personal and professional networking. Facebook, which originated as a college-based-only network, is now the world’s largest social media network. Over the past 10 years, Facebook has greatly expanded its ability to connect, adding even business and professional options to a user’s profile. Although newer features of the site allows users to add professional skills to their profile so that they may treat their Facebook page as both a social outlet and a resume, LinkedIn is considered
more of the default option for professional networking. LinkedIn is a platform developed for professional occupations, both businesses and individuals. It serves as a directory of professionals and companies and provides a forum for job searching, candidate searching, and company research. Twitter is a little different, allowing registered users to send messages with limited characters. Users can obtain real-time information, ideas, news, and connect with others quickly.

All of these platforms can be used to improve your social media presence and, therefore, increase your professional networking opportunities. However, it is important to understand that maintaining a professional persona through your accounts requires a delicate balance. You need to be authentically you, but you don’t necessarily need to share everything. There are two major take-aways that all young professionals should keep in mind: curate wisely, and enjoy the benefits. Consider your professional social media “self” not as an authentic reflection of your true self, but rather as a curated version of that “self” that you would be proud to show any potential employer, client, friend, or grandmother. Then, armed with that curated image, use the advantages offered by social media platforms to their fullest, for educating yourself, sharing information, building relationships with potential mentors, and showcasing your skill set.

Social Media and Professionalism
Be mindful that the same rules of professional etiquette that exist in business interactions also exist in those interactions that take place in a virtual space. The same expectations that exist in the real world are alive and well in the social media sphere—as are the potential repercussions. The college intern who drinks too much at the work gathering has been replaced by the college intern whose public Facebook page contains photo after photo of hard-partying scenes. There are plenty of bad examples out there, and the temptation to respond and engage in unprofessional behavior will be strong. In fact, a recent survey by FindLaw reported that 29% of social media users between the ages of 18 and 34 say they have posted photos, comments, or other information that could come back to haunt them during a job search. Similarly, 21% of those users say they have taken down a
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photo, post, or comment over fears of the repercussions it could have with an employer.

And while it is perhaps obvious to young professionals that their Facebook page should be scrubbed clean of evidence of their wilder nights, there are other things that are equally as important: employers and clients alike now routinely search social media pages for a secondary layer of information about their prospective choices. An incomplete LinkedIn profile—or, worse, one riddled with errors—will immediately convey more about you than your resume ever will. Online comments disparaging a company’s actions or ridiculing its leadership can end up linked to your name, and poisoning it. And posting about your job interview online, even positively, is considered taboo; a 2013 Adecco survey found that 12% of hiring managers found out about their candidates making the mistake of discussing their interview online both before and after the interview took place.

Conversely, a well-built social media presence is your own recruiting machine. A developed LinkedIn presence, typo-free and showcasing your skills and interests, and conveying some of your own personality, is a strong draw. Recruiters use social media pages as their pool of potential talent and will contact people directly based on nothing more than a strong profile page.

Build on that strength by connecting with friends, acquaintances, former co-workers, and employers. The LinkedIn “groups” function can be extremely helpful—you can search for groups with your specific interests and join in the conversation about your industry. This is a great way to learn about what people in your industry are talking about, while also contributing your own thoughts. Facebook can also play a role, as a great many professional organizations or affinity groups have extremely active Facebook pages that can, in turn, lead to personal connections. There is an etiquette to this type of interaction as well. Typically, those people who join a new group and immediately start asking for jobs or personal connections are disregarded. Just as in real life, it is important to establish your credentials by participating in the conversation and showing that you are genuinely interested in what others have to say.

Managing Your Social Identities
To get the most use out of social media networking, you must effectively manage your social identities. This requires a handful of conscience decisions on your part to separate your personal and professional presence. Some people create different accounts on each social network on which they are active, while others utilize some services for personal use and some for professional. As you look to establish your own method follow these rules of thumb:

1. Only use Facebook for true friends and not professional friends and acquaintances. Use the following test: “If I want you to see pictures of me and my college bestie dressed like superheroes for Halloween, I’ll accept your friend request.” This creates a distinction between personal friends and coworkers/potential employers. Even if you have nothing to hide, reserving Facebook for your own personal world is healthy and expected.

2. Use privacy options on your accounts, but accept that there is no sanctuary. Although all social media networks have privacy options that you should use, it is important to understand that nothing posted online is safe. Protect your information and utilize privacy options for all of your accounts.

3. Use Common sense. Perception is key. The lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred on social networking sites. If you are about to post something that could potentially harm your professional presence, then don’t do it. Always represent yourself professionally, ethnically, and with integrity.

As a young professional, you are affected by the social media struggles whether you realize it or not. Make a conscious effort now to determine what is right for you and set your own ground rules. Continue to learn about different practices and options, even if you have already conditioned your presence online. And most of all, embrace social media for what it could do for you.