

Social networks test companies' boundaries

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Max Borges, right, owner of Max Borges Agency, a consumer tech public relations firm, chats with Chase Fitzgerald over the company Facebook page. Borges promotes personal use of social networking for his employees.



Scott Austin makes a living arguing lawsuits over online privacy matters. He understands why his former law firm has a strict policy forbidding social networking in the workplace. But Austin saw first hand the dilemma a business faces when young associates came to him frustrated: "They were saying we need it because it's the way our potential clients communicate."

As most companies understand the value of connecting with customers online in social networks, some also fear employees will waste work time or worse, reveal confidential information or offend a customer or co-worker.

With social networking exploding, at some point this year, every business will have to confront the challenge and answer this question: Embrace it or ban it?

As a boss, Max Borges chose to embrace it. His Miami agency provides marketing to consumer electronics and personal technology manufacturers. It is flush with young account executives whom Borges trusts to use social networking productively, even at the office. "They work hard and get their job done. I know they might be posting during the day but if they were slacking it wouldn't go unnoticed."

Borges says he's wise enough to know his employees are going to be on Facebook or LinkedIn or blogs whether or not he bans them. So instead, he held a meeting and taught his workers about privacy settings and etiquette around social networks. "I think the way to go is to talk openly about expectations, respectful conduct and productivity."

At the other extreme, financial firms like JP Morgan Chase and Morgan Stanley or traditional companies like FPL chose to block or forbid employees from going to external sites at work. Indeed, one in four companies blocks access to social networks because they view them as a productivity killer, according to a 2008 survey of 200 human resource professionals by Challenger Gray & Christmas, an outplacement consulting firm.

Technology innovation expert Scott Klososky calls corporate attitude toward social networking a replay of their original response to the Internet. ``They blocked the Internet, but it was so powerful they had to quit blocking and change to monitoring."

Banning it outright might not do good anyway. According to a study by Ruder Finn, a public relations agency, most people are using their handheld devices to connect to the Internet instead of desktop computers, with 91 percent of mobile phone users going online to socialize compared to only 79 percent of desktop users. And, as experts note, if workers are forced onto their handhelds, employers can't monitor their usage.

`NOT ON MY DIME'

At **Pordes Residential Sales & Marketing** in South Florida, tech-savvy **Michael Internoscia**, vice president of sales, uses social networking in business. ``There are a ton of sales agents out there and we connect with them on LinkedIn and invite them to our projects," he said. But the real estate agents are independent contractors. **Internoscia** doesn't want his staff members on social networks during the work day. ``I'm the guy who would say, `What are you doing? You're not going to blog or Twitter on my dime.' "

In most workplaces, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter checks have replaced daydreaming for a few seconds or walking to the break room. For the most part, companies are OK with that. James Pedderson at Challenger, Gray & Christmas believes that because work and personal have become blurred, most employers look the other way, unless it becomes a problem. ``They realize they are asking a lot of their workers so as long as productivity is not falling off, they're not going to bust their chops."

A WARNING

Of course, some managers realize social networking is a problem at their company. One sales manager I spoke with says she has warned her co-workers to curb their Facebook addictions. ``I see, just wandering around the office, people are using Facebook but it's not being used for a business purpose. I told them it is ammunition if they want to let someone go."

Austin, now a partner at Miami's Gordon & Rees, says the best legal practice for businesses is to think carefully about regulating the use of social networking tools and provide rules of road.

Klososky, author of *Enterprise Social Technology*, says companies are just beginning to understand how big an issue this will become. ``Their young workers are digital natives. They've grown up with social networks and see them as tools. When those tools are blocked, they don't want to work for that company."

Even more, by going a step further and building their own social networks, companies can connect and communicate with staff, crowd source new ideas and encourage collaboration, he says: ``It is not a fad anymore. It's a powerful trend. Strategic companies won't ban its use, they'll integrate it."

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