

WHITE PAPER

# Opportunities & Challenges of Social Media in the Workplace

*Customers no longer want to be talked at. Instead, they are looking for organizations to listen, to appropriately engage, and to respond to them.*

The use of social media has exploded in the last several years, so much so that it now touches almost every facet of our lives. Friendster, the first social media site, was launched in 2003. Myspace, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter soon followed. Facebook, the most popular of the social media sites, currently has over 500 million users. It is the second most popular website behind Google.

Social media is about community and relationships. You probably already realize how important it is to increase your businesses exposure in your local community. Perhaps you belong to the local Chamber of Commerce, Rotary club or serve on the board of a charitable organization. Think of social media as an online extension of the many networking activities you may already participate in as part of the “real world.” Some of the more commonly known professional sites are LinkedIn, FastPitch and Plaxo. These sites are used for business networking and job hunting. Many people consider them to be customer lead generation vehicles as well. These sites share the common objective of building an online business community. They can support your business by strengthening and expanding its network of contacts. Based on specific trade and business information, LinkedIn, Fastpitch and Plaxo can enable you to connect with individuals who may have mutually beneficial opportunities to offer.

### **Eight social media workplace opportunities:**

- 1. Promote your company’s brand**—sales and marketing professionals can use social media to introduce and promote new products and services in a way that increases a potential target market exponentially. Social networking sites allow consumers to communicate with each other and to share their thoughts and ideas about your company’s products. Additionally, social media sites provide consumers with the opportunity to “follow” your products or services or to “tweet” about their experiences, thereby creating a more personal connection while building brand loyalty.
- 2. Engage your customers**—whatever your company sells, whether a product or a service, it has a customer base that can be engaged through social media. But the manner of engagement is unique because social media has revolutionized the style of business-to-customer communications. Customers no longer want to be talked at. Instead, they are looking for organizations to listen, to appropriately engage, and to respond to them. Social media sites are now used as a version of electronic word of mouth and provide a platform for your consumers to not only speak directly to your company, but also for consumers to communicate with each other, sharing reviews or testimonials about specific products or services. Companies that join social media sites are able to create stronger relationships with their customers and are also able to improve customer service by utilizing social media to address customer service issues.

*Using social media as a sales and marketing tool is a very inexpensive mode of advertising because it reaches a vast audience for a marginal investment.*

- 3. Improved recruiting techniques**—the days of simply posting a job on a job board or running a newspaper advertisement is long over. Instead, recruiters today are increasingly turning to social media sites to attract and recruit top talent. In order to avoid being barraged with hundreds of resumes submitted by unqualified candidates, recruiters are choosing to perform targeted searches on professional social media sites, such as LinkedIn. Doing so allows recruiters to search for candidates with specific knowledge, skills and experience. Prospective employees are also using company profiles posted on social media sites to develop lists of companies where they would be interested in working. By creating a detailed profile, your company will be able to attract the best candidates and maintain strong ties with former valued employees who could be potential candidates in the future.
- 4. Employee engagement**—Social Networking tools allow organizations to improve communication and productivity among employees. Professional social media sites such as LinkedIn, allow your employees to join specific work groups in order to engage in conversations with other professionals in similar industries. This kind of participation can broaden the employee’s knowledge base and help to generate new and innovative ways of meeting business challenges. Employees can also use social networking sites to build targeted professional networks that can help them stay current with market trends. Allowing employees the latitude to utilize social media techniques also promotes trust with employees and fosters a more collaborative environment.
- 5. Cost effective**—using social media as a sales and marketing tool is a very inexpensive mode of advertising because it reaches a vast audience for a marginal investment. Instead of spending large amounts of money on marketing and advertising campaigns, let your happy customers advertise for you. Many consumers rely heavily on social media sites such as Yelp, Urbanspoon, and Citysearch for peer reviews of businesses. Many consumers are no longer going directly to the source for product information; they trust their peers to fairly review products for them. Therefore it’s a good idea to encourage your customers or clients to check-in at your business, or direct them to review your product online. This method ensures that you reach a vast audience via social networks, and even better, doesn’t cost you a thing.
- 6. Share information about your company**—both customers and potential employees use social media to research companies that they have an interest in knowing more about. Social media sites provide an excellent medium for companies to share positive information. It is important to leverage sites such as Facebook and Twitter to your advantage. If your company doesn’t already have a Facebook page you should challenge your marketing team to create one.

*Social media is an ideal venue in which to establish your company as a thought leader.*

Posting a Facebook page will allow your company to generate an online community of clients or customers that are familiar with your product. Encourage your customers to “like” your Facebook page. Each time an individual “likes” a page; all of their friends see that endorsement and may become motivated to visit your site. If you have a new product coming out—or maybe you’ve been recognized for a current product or service—let your customers know via Twitter. Strategically timed “tweets” disseminate information about your company to thousands of potential customers or employees.

- 7. An opportunity to listen**—remember, just because you aren’t listening, doesn’t mean people aren’t talking. Conversations about you and your business may be taking place with you or without you. By actively taking part in the conversations happening on the web, you are able to manage these conversations in a positive manner. Leverage social media to solicit constructive feedback from both customers and employees. Social media allows companies to collect feedback both more quickly and more cost-effectively than does a traditional email or phone survey strategy. Many social media sites allow businesses to create polls, which are posted online and are viewable to anyone that visits your site. This is a great way to get invaluable feedback that you can use to improve your product. Also, by encouraging employees to participate in these polls you can improve employment practices or pinpoint deficiencies in your human capital practices and strategy.
- 8. Thought leadership**—social media is an ideal venue in which to establish your company as a thought leader. Many companies effectively utilize social media blogging sites to provide company-specific content. Not only does this show your customers that you are a thought leader, it also generates conversation on the topic you choose to blog about. By framing your message in a specific way you are sure to generate consensus which will lead to increased conversation about your topic, and ultimately your company. And when you give people a reason to discuss your topic you are generating online chatter—the goal of any social media strategy.

### Guard against the pitfalls of social media:

If a company has a substandard product, social media won’t fix it. However, if you are a service organization, then social media can absolutely help, provided that you take the opportunity to listen. To properly showcase your best work, you need great content on your website, and it needs to be updated frequently. Monitor your brand’s reputation and be ready to respond. Set up a listening post, (a system for gathering, analyzing, and managing conversations about your brand). Once you have this information you need to analyze the conversations to determine how to handle it.

*Social media could be used as a forum for disgruntled employees to launch online attacks against companies or employees, thereby creating possible litigious situations.*

- Employees who continually monitor social media sites may not be as focused as they should be—a risk that this could negatively affect their productivity. Your company’s social media policy should prohibit employees from engaging social media on the company’s technology or during work time, unless for the employer.
- Using social media sites as part of the hiring process may lead to issues of discrimination. A candidate may argue that a company had access to information about a protected status, such as race, disability or age when make hiring decisions. Just having knowledge of this information may be seen as a basis for adverse employment action. It’s a best practice to use social media sites after the candidate has been interviewed and only if you are interested in the candidate. Be consistent if you are going to conduct social media checks. Your HR department should perform these checks; hiring managers should not perform their own independent search.
- The “friending” of subordinates/constituents can be a slippery slope. A company may obtain information about illegal or other conduct of potential concern, such as drug use or excessive drinking. The company’s silence may be seen as condoning illegal or dangerous conduct, but getting involved may potentially be just as problematic. A company may also have access to information on an employee’s religious beliefs, medical issues, or sexual orientation. Knowledge of protected information may be seen as a basis for adverse employment action. Companies should consider guidelines or restrictions on Friending subordinates or others that have a reporting relationship, but steer clear of restrictions against “friending” co-workers, which can run afoul of the National Labor Relations Act.
- Social media could be used as a forum for disgruntled employees to launch online attacks against companies or employees, thereby creating possible litigious situations. It is important that care is taken when disciplining an employee for disparaging the company or employees. If an employee is speaking about disliking a manager it may be “protected activity” under the National Labor Relations Act. There is a fine line that exists between “protected activity,” on the one hand, and libel or slander, on the other.
- Employers may find it difficult to act on an employee’s off-duty social media online activity since expressing views of workplace conditions may be protected under the National Labor Relations Act or whistleblower and retaliation statutes. In general, employees in union and non-union environments have the right to speak freely about working conditions, including wages, hours, and other matters.
- An employer’s or employee’s use of social networking sites creates a risk of disseminating proprietary or confidential information, such as customer information, internal policies and procedures, product information, financial records, and trade secrets. An employee’s post about a successful day for

*A robust Internet education policy within a company—as well as effective monitoring tools—are critical to solving social networking security issues in order to keep employees safe, compliant, and productive.*

the company, for example, could violate notice, disclosure, or reporting requirements. Employees in the healthcare industry are especially susceptible to potential confidentiality breaches due to close contact with patients' private medical records and information. But, be careful not to implement overly broad confidentiality requirements, which can run afoul of the National Labor Relations Act.

- Social media sites may be a common source of malware or spyware that can pose security risks to organizations. A layered approach to protection is advisable. Companies need to deploy a variety of tools in an intelligent way to monitor, manage and control how different individuals use new web applications being used in the workplace. The best solutions allow for flexible policy controls where certain groups, departments or individuals can have customized Internet access depending on company Internet policy. Some policies provide very specific guidance on who can control and/or access specific sites. Of course, the technology of choice should also fit comfortably into the latest virtualized, cloud-based environments that are increasingly becoming the norm.
- A robust Internet education policy within a company—as well as effective monitoring tools—are critical to solving social networking security issues in order to keep employees safe, compliant, and productive. The boundary between home and work is blurring more and more, and companies need to keep pace by deploying security tools that offer limitless flexibility without compromising control or ease of use.

### How to protect your organization from social media pitfalls:

- Implement a social media policy. Your policy should state that there is no expectation of privacy for employees when using company property to visit social media sites. If you already have an electronic media or Internet policy, a section on social media can be added. Your existing policy should state that employers have the right to monitor or review anything written or created on company equipment without the permission of the employee—and this extends to social media as well.
- State that all company policies regarding discrimination, harassment, violence, and the like apply fully to all social media even those not listed in the policy. It's critical that managers understand their obligation in this regard. If a manager "friends" a subordinate, they may be privy to information that is considered a protected status such as religion, medical information or sexual orientation. It must be clear that the employer can't use information obtained in this manner to discriminate against an employee.

*Chances are that your competitors are already using social media to their advantage.*

- Managers must also be educated on what is considered “protected activity” by employees. The National Labor Relations Board is actively engaged in exploring what type of online activity is considered protected for both union and non-union employees.
- State that when employees are engaged in personal social networking they should identify themselves and make it clear that their blog/web-site posts are personal views, rather than implying that they speak for the company.
- Reserve the right to monitor all media/social media to ensure compliance with company policies. The policy should remind everyone not to post trade secrets like confidential, proprietary systems, processes, plans, know-how, and technology, but the policy should not go so far as to prohibit the posting of all confidential information.
- Do not say that you will monitor everything or you could be liable for things missed. The same principle applies to other policies where you should generally avoid words like “always” and “never”. The policy should state that you reserve the right to monitor or view anything done on company equipment or posted on company sponsored social media sites.
- Continue to educate employees about the potential consequences of posting comments, photos, or videos online. This is particularly important for the segment of the workforce that has grown up with Facebook and LinkedIn. Having experienced these social media channels as a part of their everyday life, this employee segment may need to be reminded that future employers will be reviewing their online information. Hence, they need to be careful not to post something that might jeopardize a future job opportunity.
- Promote a respectful workplace, but be careful about blanket requirements vis-à-vis respect, as they can run afoul of the National Labor Relations Act.
- Always seek the guidance of experienced legal counsel when enacting a social media policy.

Perhaps you think that the use of social media is merely a fad that will fade with time. Maybe you think you are too busy to spend time on Facebook (and secretly judge those that do). Whether you jump on the bandwagon or ignore its existence, the reality is that you may be missing an opportunity. Chances are that your competitors are already using social media to their advantage. Undoubtedly your employees have also been using social media for a long time. Most importantly—to you as a businessperson—your customers are using and receiving information via this important, new communications media right now.

## About TriNet

TriNet serves as a trusted HR partner to growing companies, helping them to contain costs, minimize employer-related risks, relieve administrative burden, and keep focused on their core business functions. From routine employee benefits service and payroll processing to high-level human capital consulting, TriNet's PEO expertise is integrated with every facet of a client's organization. Its solutions specialize in serving fast-moving companies in fields such as technology and professional services, who recognize that top-quality employees are the most critical competitive asset.

For more information, visit [www.trinet.com](http://www.trinet.com)

### Disclaimer

The contents of this white paper have been prepared for educational and information purposes only. The content does not provide legal advice or legal opinions on any specific matters. Transmission of this information is not intended to create, and receipt does not constitute, a lawyer-client relationship between TriNet, the author(s), or the publishers and you. You should not act or refrain from acting on any legal matter based on the content without seeking professional counsel.

© 2012 TriNet. All rights reserved. All trademarks, trade names, service marks and logos referenced herein belong to their respective companies. July 2012.

Learn more at [TriNet.com](http://TriNet.com) or call **888.874.6388**

