

# Mastering the Game When Employees Use Social Media

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The social Web has hit the mainstream, fundamentally changing the way companies communicate with customers and promote themselves. In addition to the formal marketing campaigns that incorporate Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., many employees use these social media and networking tools on their own.

Employees' blogs, Web pages, comments, etc. can be significant touch points for your brand. An enthusiastic employee might generate positive feelings about the company, while a disgruntled one could sour people's opinions. Some companies have prohibited employees from mentioning their companies or brands in their personal social media, but this is not a practical or desirable way to prevent negative comments. Denying employees the ability to express themselves is difficult to manage and may eventually backfire. Plus, when you do so, you miss out on developing powerful word-of-mouth advertising through some of the most influential people available to you.

In recent years, many companies have cultivated the role of employees as brand ambassadors. In particular, frontline employees are seen as critical touch points with companies using brand engagement programs to teach their front desk and floor staff how to represent the brand appropriately. "Friends and family" discounts or coupons often are distributed through employees in order to generate broader awareness and positive impressions for the company in the community. When companies introduce new products, they often distribute samples to employees in order to generate trials among new customers.

It makes sense to extend these efforts to the new social media platforms and encourage and enable employees to use these tools to promote the brand online. But it's difficult to strike the right balance between fostering employee brand evangelism and ensuring appropriate employee communication.

**It's helpful to plan your approach as if you were coaching a football game, using a combination of defensive and offensive tactics. Providing social media guidelines to your employees is a defensive tactic that will help you protect your brand while brand guidelines—your offense—will help you promote it.**

Social media guidelines protect the company and its brand name by setting the ground rules for employees' usage of the social Web. Effective social media guidelines encourage users to be responsible and respectful and provide examples of appropriate communication. They also indicate clearly how confidential information should be handled. In addition, they reiterate the corporate rules of business conduct and direct people to where they can learn more about them.

Social media guidelines should be widely accessible and updated frequently to reflect the new risks that may arise from emerging technologies and applications.

To take full advantage of the brand-building opportunities in social media and networking, companies need to play offense as well. **Brand guidelines aren't simply for showing how to use trademarks and logos. Companies can use brand guidelines to inspire and instruct employees on how to generate excitement and interest in the brand.**

Brand guidelines should include:

**1. How to talk about the brand.** The messaging and themes communicate what the brand stands for, what the vision is and what the key differentiators are. You shouldn't assume that employees know this information and how to articulate it. It's important to relay brand strategy in a way that's accessible and understandable to employees at all levels and in all functions. And if you explain the background and rationale behind the strategy, people are more likely to buy into it. Plus, this knowledge helps them figure out how to represent the brand in unexpected or unusual situations.

**2. What is the brand personality and how to bring it to life with writing, images, etc.** Some employees may know "what" to say but not necessarily "how." Brand guidelines should explain how the brand would act if it were a person. That way, employees can personally relate to the brand and understand its defining attributes. By including writing samples, images, stories and videos that capture the personality of the brand, you help people express the brand appropriately when they use similar methods.

**3. How to foster relationships with customers that contribute to a great brand experience.**

Brand guidelines should explain who your key target segments are and what's important to them. At the same time, be sure employees know what the current brand campaign or sales focus is and make sure they have accurate information (e.g., Web site URL, promotional offer, new product announcements, etc.) to share with customers. Help them make the connection between what customers are looking for and what the brand has to offer.

Brand guidelines promote proactive and productive engagement in social media. The combination of playing offense with brand guidelines and defense with social media guidelines makes for a winning strategy.