

Watch Your Reputation on Social Networks

Written by U.S Immigration News

Thursday, 03 March 2011 23:39 - Last Updated Thursday, 03 March 2011 23:50



In this day and age, public social networks have become some of the most popular places on the Internet. Almost every other person belongs to a social network; some belong to several. Social networks are carefully developed digital spaces called virtual communities. They are created so individuals can come together to form groups or networks of people who are connected by common interests such as: friendship, kinship, beliefs, careers, life experiences, hobbies etc. Individuals also have the option of further developing these networks by connecting with people they may not know personally. The boom of some of the most popular social networks such as: facebook, twitter, myspace, Flickr, Hi5, LinkedIn has allowed millions to not only digitally congregate and network but to share and exchange information that is often very personal.

Internet networking has become the socially acceptable medium through which anyone can sell their ideas, business, services, products and skills. One of its main appeals is that it affords free or affordable access. While social networking is a good way of connecting with people it is also a digital medium that can make or break reputations, this is the dark side of social networking. While it offers great opportunities, its use requires wisdom and restraint.

My recent survey of 100 people on their use of facebook, gives an interesting view of people's perspectives on social networking.

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The Pros: Social networks are created for people to improve their chances of forming connections that can help them to advance professionally or in business. However, 82.9% of those surveyed admitted to using facebook primarily to catch up with friends and family. In that regard, while social networks can help us to advance professionally; they also help us to keep connected to those people we care about and might not have geographical access to or lost contact with over time.

The Cons: If you are on a social network you can attest to the fact that people often let their guards down. Some people write curse words, use offensive language, and post revealing (sometimes semi-nude) photos of themselves or others. Infidelity is also common on social networks, as some use it to hide their extra-marital communications from their spouses. Social networks have also become a sort of “bully pulpit” where people post offensive or hurtful words about other people or religion, politics etc. Yet, while those who do these things might find their practice inoffensive or cool, 77.1% of those surveyed admitted that their perception of someone has changed from positive to negative because of what that person posted on facebook. Even further, 80% of those surveyed stated that they have “defriended” or “digitally isolated” someone who was on their facebook network when they perceived that person’s postings to be negative, controversial or insensitive.

The more serious consequences of letting your guard down on social networks seems to be that you not only lose the respect of those in your network but you also tarnish your own reputation. For many what a person posts is a revelation of their true self. Law enforcement officials and lawyers are known to use social media to find incriminating evidence. Added to this is the fact that companies, colleges, business partners, clients, are now using facebook postings as determiners to hire, fire, accept or decline people.

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If you or anyone in your home, especially minors, uses the social media it is critical that wisdom prevail at all times. Here are some frequently asked questions to consider:

- 1) Should I befriend everyone who requests my friendship on social networks? No! The people on your network create an assumption of the kind of person you are. Even on social networks the old adage is true: "Birds of a feather flock together."
- 2) Should parents monitor their children on social networks? Yes! Some children and even youth don't yet have the maturity to self-regulate. Parents need to regulate that their children's postings do not potentially hamper future goals or aspirations.
- 3) What happens if I post something that I later regret? Go back and delete it! Life is made up of second chances. Clean up anything that will give an erroneous impression of you. Take down those photos of you at a party doing the lap dance, drinking, semi-nude, showing too much cleavage, or making gang poses. A picture speaks a thousand words.
- 4) How can I be more careful in regulating my posts? Think before you write. If you do not want that post as a headline in the newspaper with your name on it, then don't write it.
- 5) Are social networks evil? No. It is the use that some give social media that is questionable. Be careful of the use you give it because it will say a lot about you to others.

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