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me, you: • the rise of social media and its effects on brand image

Social media and networks are increasingly permeating company life, offering businesses of all sizes a channel for their marketing, communication and recruitment strategies and allowing them to reach larger audiences across geographies and generations. But whilst social media may provide a great portal for business, companies should be mindful that what lies behind the door may pose a big threat to their brand image.

Social media, by definition, is media for social interaction, often user-generated and using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogues.

Facebook, a social networking site, is the most popular with over 500 million users. Facebook allows friends to stay connected by sharing messages, photos, videos and a host of other information. It also creates a platform for businesses to showcase their brand. There are other social media and networking sites, of which the best known are MySpace, which focuses on entertainment and music, LinkedIn - a professional networking site - and Twitter, which enables users to upload their own and read other users' messages called *tweets*. *Tweets* may be open to the public allowing for millions of subscribers, or *followers*.

While there are great opportunities for companies in the Middle East to benefit from social media, it is crucial to set a social media strategy properly so as to avoid any potential risks that can damage company reputation.

Social Media in the Middle East on the rise

During the 1990s, the terms 'social media' and 'social network' were still relatively unknown outside specialized "guru" circles. Thanks to advancing technologies and easy-to-use interfaces, social media, and social networks in particular, are commonly used among millions of people today, including the Middle East region. While there are great opportunities for companies in the Middle East to benefit from social media, it is crucial to set social media strategy properly so as to avoid any potential risks that can damage company reputation.

According to a recent study conducted in the Middle East, there are 15 million Facebook users across many MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries, with 'logging onto social media sites' considered a top online activity conducted by men and women equally. Both Facebook and YouTube added Arabic interfaces to their applications, driving additional users from Arab nations. Companies in these countries cannot afford to ignore this group of users or indeed the benefits that social media offers them to stay in the lead. However, one of the biggest hurdles faced by companies in the Middle East looking to introduce social media techniques is that there is no single model that can be followed as a 'best practice' example. Many people have created guidelines that can be followed but results vary from industry to industry as well as from company to company and region to region, so the results should be used cautiously.

Gain opportunity while managing the risks

The approach to using social media can be basic or it can form part of a detailed strategy. What an organization wishes to achieve from its use of social networking should form the basis of its strategy. It doesn't need to be complex, but it is necessary to ensure that it does not lose sight of its objectives. Tactics don't drive strategies, so adopting the latest fad as a strategy is misguided. At best, it will produce nothing more than a short-lived victory. Whichever approach is adopted it should be flexible enough to address a company's strategic goals while simultaneously accounting for fluctuating economic conditions. The benefits of using social media will vary depending on each company's requirements - from introducing the brand or creating brand awareness, to increasing traffic to a company's website, generating business opportunities, all the way to sourcing talent and staying connected with alumni.

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Engage the public through social media

Social media are here to stay in the Middle East and are increasingly becoming a key source of interaction within the public sphere. Companies need to set brand guidelines to address.

In communicating, proper care and consideration need to be taken around language and tone. A company's identity on social networks needs to be slightly informal and constantly engaging by being refreshed every day. It has to sound realistic for it to be effective, slightly different from the typical marketing approach. Companies using social media and networks are encouraged to engage their consumers constructively with their brand - whether by contributing to a new product, providing insights and access to thought leadership publications or through creating dialogue or even through humor. Continually interacting with the public adds great value, which also implies there may be situations encountered where engaging with certain individuals may have a negative impact on the brand. Such negative interactions can spread very quickly and should be managed and dealt with immediately. Only selective people within the company should have the appropriate access and authority to speak and respond on behalf of the organization. Such individuals should have the appropriate tools in place that allow them to represent the company on social media.




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Hints and tips for company social media representatives:

1. DO look for influencers in company/broader community: connect with well-networked individuals and high-profile individuals. Focus on both internal and external participation. Work on relationship building and engagement within the company. Invite employees, key leaders to join and provide input if possible.
2. DO pace yourself and be relevant: give thought to messaging – provide value rather than comment on everything. Remember news on LinkedIn has an expiry of a week, Facebook a few days. Twitter can be seconds or moments.
3. DO monitor your success/ROI: it's important to weigh up the value of input vs. output. Valuable metrics include a combination of click-throughs, number of quality connections/followers, re-tweeting or on-sharing of content, engagement, robust discussions, interactions, brand sentiment, quality of hire, etc.
4. DO be flexible: if it doesn't work for you, move on - that's the beauty of the ever-changing nature of social media. But don't abandon a company-branded presence to rot away in the social media sphere; remove it.
5. DO keep it professional: if you don't have something nice to say, it may be best not to say it. Social media is a public forum – be aware of the impact that negativity could have on brand.
6. DON'T offer legal advice: be community-minded and offer advice based on your personal experiences, but be aware of legal boundaries and limitations. Consider seeking guidance from local risk/legal/practice protection regarding your obligations. Do not offer professional advice.

With multiple articles appearing daily representing opposing views on social media, it may get a bit confusing where the truth lies. As always, it is somewhere in the middle.

Attract talent and strengthen employer brand

A company's key objectives in using social media for recruitment are many and include proactively sourcing talent, leveraging employees' existing networks and increasing referrals, presenting a realistic, personal impression of the company for prospective candidates and clients, as well as mobilizing employees to become talent scouts.

Increasing brand awareness remains one of the most important ways for recruitment through social media as it creates a dialogue with candidates and provides insight into the company. When attracting candidates, rather than using social media to provide information about the company itself (people are technically savvy enough to simply visit the website for such general information) it is perhaps best to offer candidates the chance to connect with employees who can share their experiences and best practices allowing a sneak preview on what to expect if they were to join the company. Organizations are encouraged to empower their staff to be mobilized to become 'talent scouts.' This however urges the need to create clear social media policies, to ensure brand protection.

Hints and tips for recruiters when making any contact through social media

- Familiarize yourself with the market/industry the candidate is working in before making any contact
- Probe to find out the candidate's goals and interests.
- Market your company through highlighting how a vacant position can help in achieving a candidate's goals and how he/she will add value to your company.
- Engage in short and straight-to-the-point discussions, provide interesting information and end the conversation in a way that leaves the candidate with something to think about.
- Differentiate your company from competitors by discussing non-classified projects, achievements or key clients.

In the case of using social media for recruitment purposes, creating a solid profile on a candidate using multiple resources and media outlets will assist in the recruitment process as it may allow for information on a candidate's cultural fit, background and technical competencies. Given that LinkedIn is a professional network, it is a good starting point to build a profile since many relevant professional details on a candidate may be available. However on the downside, information posted is what the individual desires to share with the public and information they do not wish to share will be difficult to uncover.

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Protect the brand: raising employee awareness

Employees are a company's brand champions and can add great value to enhance and strengthen the brand, especially for potential candidates. However, the increasing simplicity of communicating over the Internet can make it easy to forget the risks and potential work ethic conflicts that may result. Proactive social media monitoring coupled with quick actions to remedy any damage to brand equity is essential. To minimize potential risks, companies must set policies that outline online behavior expectations on data privacy, confidentiality, security and the dissemination of intellectual property. It is further encouraged that such policy is regularly communicated through various internal communication outlets.

The policy should also outline employees' responsibility to protect the brand and the consequences that may occur, be it disciplinary action or dismissal, for damaging the reputation of the company. Examples abound of disciplinary action taken against employees as a result of a hastily posted tweet or Facebook message.

As a final note

With multiple articles appearing daily representing opposing views on social media, it may get a bit confusing where the truth lies. As always, it is somewhere in the middle. Despite this fact, even if companies are not active on social media, they generally need to monitor their public image and respond quickly to a negative vibe before it spreads across cyberspace. An incident may be encountered whereby an extremely vocal individual with a large number of *followers* may damage a company's reputation with his *tweets* for example. Responding fast and on a regular basis may save a lot of money and unwanted effort.

On a positive note, if the brand is generating a certain buzz, companies can take advantage and use it to reinforce their reputation and promote engagement with the client or consumer and even recruit talent without having to pay for advertising. Businesses can also assess their marketing strategy by continually monitoring responses on the social media scenes. Organizations should have clear guidelines for the use of these media however, so that a potentially positive tool does not prove to be a poisoned chalice.

by **Maya Rafii Zaatari**, senior manager, Human Resources, Deloitte in the Middle East

Highlights of an employee social media policy Dos and don'ts of social media for employees

1. DO NOT use social networking to discuss or communicate company business or that of its clients or employees.
2. DO NOT use social media to store business contacts that have not authorized you to do so.
3. DO NOT sign up to any part of a profile or service that allows the site you are accessing to have automated access to your business e-mail address book or other information.
4. DO NOT post any unauthorized videos with the company name or references on these sites.

What do I, as an employee, need to think about before I post on social media?

1. Have I set up my profile securely? Have I limited who can see what?
2. Do I really want everyone to know this about me?
3. Would I be embarrassing anyone I know (or the company as my employer) by posting this photo, video, comment or information?
4. Would this person agree that I can share their contact details?
5. Would I be breaking any of my obligations to my company's Confidentiality Policy or Code of Ethics by sharing this information?
6. In the case of a business posting, have I got the right authorization?
7. Does sharing this information put me or my personal safety, or the personal safety of another person, at risk?
8. Would this information be useful to a person wanting to 'pretend' to be me, i.e. is it putting me at risk of identity fraud?