

Going behind the corporate firewall to share information

Businesses pursue private social media sites that mimic public sites.

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Most companies know that using popular social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter can pay dividends for their marketing campaigns and employee recruitment efforts.

But perhaps not as many firms have grasped how to direct in-house — and even in-industry — communications not meant for the general public.

For instance, how does a firm connect its new hires with its longstanding cultural and organizational knowledge — elements that probably should be kept out of the Internet's vast public realm?



Willis

Chris Willis, CEO of Media 1, a consulting firm in the international training and learning industry located in Grand Haven, said that type of task can be undertaken by using a social and creative learning site set up within a company's virtual territory.

"How do we get the new folks that are coming in up to speed? How do we not lose that organizational knowledge? There is a place for social media behind the corporate firewall to help them there," said Willis.

"It's huge. It goes way beyond

just marketing. It has a lot of different learning and talent management applications."

Willis said a company should create a private version of Facebook safely tucked behind its firewall.

"There are some things about my job that I don't want everybody else to know, but I want other people who have my role in my company to be able to know."

She explained that a private site also can be set up for a company's "channel partners" — individuals or firms not directly employed by a company but having a close relationship with it. Think of an automobile manufacturer and the dealerships that sell its products, for instance.

"You need to be able to communicate with them how to be able to sell your product and give them announcements. There are certain sites for that. We're setting up for training, delivery sites and portals for those kinds of people that are private within those groups," she said.

Willis said most companies seem to be curious about these private sites, and some eagerly want to create one. She said almost all employees want work-specific social sites, especially the new crop of workers who are regular users of social media sites. But she cautioned that companies that set them up may have to commit to the larger concept.

Willis recalled one firm Media 1 worked that used social media to market itself and recruit employees. But she said the same workers that the company had found through Facebook and Twitter became upset when the firm blocked access to those sites from the workplace.

"So it set up this kind of culture clash. The new people who are

coming up are so used to it. It's just second nature to them to be able to crowd-source information and be able to get answers. When they get in and are blocked on their network from being able to do this, it's very frustrating for them," she said.

Still, Willis recognized that not every business can offer employees that access. Government agencies, financial institutions and medical providers, for example, may not be able to because of federal and state laws.

"You've got all these rules and regulations that make it very scary for people just to be throwing around information like that. So even if it is behind the firewall, it has to be heavily monitored or contained," she said, so that only certain people can see and share certain things.

"They haven't all quite figured that out yet, so we're in the process of sorting that out," she said.

Willis pointed out that some firms have gone to great lengths and expense to create a specific site for, say, a sales staff, only to see the space go unused.

She said that outcome mostly likely came about because there wasn't anyone who encouraged employees to get involved, rewarded them like they are rewarded in personal social-media sites, and molded them into a cohesive social community.

"If we set up a cohort community because a group is going through, say, a sales class together, they will use that room to interact with each other because they have an instructor kind of guiding them and pushing them into the room," said Willis.

"You also have the peers of your group and they get to be friends. As soon as that session is over, you'll have your stragglers who will

hang on and won't want to give up. But eventually, the group will kind of die out. It has a lifecycle, just like a real class does. So these new communities are kind of forming and dying all the time."

Media 1 helps companies cultivate social learning and collaborative online solutions, including such things as communities of practice and learning portals, onboarding, HiPo/succession development, media sharing and cur-

riculum guidance. All take place behind a corporate firewall. The firm's clients include Meijer, Steelcase and Hewlett-Packard.

"Meijer has their firewall. Steelcase has their firewall. Herman Miller has their firewall. Their employees want to be able to talk to each other in the same way (as they do socially). They are all exploring this. They are all looking at it in different ways and figuring out how to do it," said Willis.