Basics – Sharing Selectively on Social Networking Sites – NYTimes.com

BASICS

On Networking Sites, Learning How Not to Share

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YOUR boss saw pictures of you drunk at last Saturday’s party. An old flame found out you’re seeing someone else. The nosy neighbor discovered you were laid off.

These and many other uncomfortable scenes are repeated daily on social networking sites, where millions of people now gather to share the details of their lives with, well, practically anyone they’ve ever known — and quite a few people they don’t know at all.

Like well-behaved kindergartners, we love to share. And Web sites like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn have grown hugely popular by making sharing bigger, faster, easier and awfully fun. With so many people participating — 35 percent of Internet users in the United States aged 18 or over now use an online social network, according to a December survey by the Pew Internet Project — life on these sites can be very rich. Yet, evidence of your nocturnal exploits, ill-considered comments and business secrets can also go global in an instant.

Much of the danger lies in the fact that, increasingly, our “friends” on social networking sites are actually a mix of people — friends, family, acquaintances, colleagues — with whom we would normally share only a piece of our lives.

The good news is that the sites, eager to prevent jittery users from scaling back what they share, have been busily adding features to give us more control over our information. These privacy settings are not always easy to find and use, and they can get downright complicated. But if you think before you post and put the privacy settings to work, you can socialize and network in the way that is comfortable for you, with less worry about mishaps.

The first decision is whether to make your profile publicly available or to keep it more private. More than a third of adult users allow all comers to see their profiles, while 60 percent restrict access in some way, according to the Pew survey. Here, it’s helpful to consider your goals. Do you simply want to connect with the friends you already know? Or are you looking to make new friends or cultivate business contacts?
All the big social sites give you control over public accessibility, but each starts at a different place on the public-private continuum.

The full profiles of MySpace users aged 18 and over are available to everyone on the Internet by default. Users can make their profiles private fairly easily, but the onus is on them to do so. Go to “Account Settings,” then “Privacy Settings,” then “Change Settings,” then “Who Can View My Profile.” From there, you can customize who gets to see what.

On Facebook, the default is a private profile — users decide how far to open the door. You can choose to limit admittance to friends or allow in members of your “networks,” which may include people who went to the same school, work at the same company or even live in the same city or country. To make adjustments, go to the “Settings” tab, select “Privacy Settings,” and work your way through the options there.

Facebook has long allowed users to create more circumspect “limited profiles” for less-close friends. But about a year ago it expanded that notion and enabled users to create many “friend lists” — one for college buddies, another for work friends, another for family — and control the information they share with each. This makes it possible to distribute party photos with only our best friends, and family reunion photos with just your family.

If you’re looking to keep a low profile on Facebook, it would also be a good idea to look at the “Applications” section in Privacy Settings. Just because you have shielded parts of your profile doesn’t mean you have done the same for Facebook applications that have access to much of the same data by default.

On LinkedIn, which is used for professional networking primarily, most people want public profiles, and that’s the default. The information LinkedIn users share tends to be professional credentials, not details of their social lives, so there’s less need for privacy. “You should think of LinkedIn as your safe self for the public world,” spokeswoman Kay Lau says.

But LinkedIn users will still want to be careful what they divulge. James J. Talerico, Jr., an independent business consultant based in Dallas, uses the site heavily to network with potential clients looking for financing and investors interested in projects so he can match them. He recently changed his settings to conceal his list of nearly 2,000 contacts, after noticing that a competitor viewed his profile. (Click on “Account & Settings” from your homepage, then scroll down to adjust the privacy settings.)

“There are so many opportunities with social networking now that they outweigh the potential risk,” Mr. Talerico says. But as in offline business settings, “you have to be cautious and you have to set those boundaries.”

Whether your profile is public or private, for security reasons, it’s a good idea to avoid posting your home address, phone numbers and other data that could help identity thieves defraud you — including details like your mother’s maiden name. Even if your profile is private, there’s little to stop your online contacts from copying and sharing your data with others. So it’s a good rule of thumb to avoid posting pictures or confessions that would humiliate you or a friend if they reached the wider world, because they very well could.

One of the best-known cautionary tales in this regard is the one about the tipsy Tinker Bell. Last Halloween, a young intern at a bank reportedly e-mailed his bosses begging off work the next day for an implied emergency trip home to New York. Co-workers saw a
picture of him on Facebook the next day in a sprite costume with a wand in one hand and a beer in the other. His boss e-mailed the shot to the intern and blind-copied the entire office. Within hours, the photo and e-mail messages were splashed on a popular blog and around the Internet. (You can see the whole story on Gawker at tinyurl.com/db9t2o.)

Maia Gilman, a freelance architectural designer in the New York area, considers carefully everything she posts on Facebook, avoiding negative comments about anyone she knows and regulating the political views she expresses. Ms. Gilman is also careful about posting photos of her two sons and has asked babysitters not to post any at all. As a self-employed person, “everywhere I go I’m meeting a prospective client,” she says. “You put your best foot forward because you don’t know who you’ll meet.”

The reality of online socializing is not all that different from actual socializing. Amanda Lenhart, a researcher at the Pew Internet Project may have put it best. “We are different people with different people,” she said.