

Click Like, Get Suspended

09/05/12 220 W - + 7 - 6

Here's a cautionary tale out of Columbus, Miss. Two firefighters and a police officer have received 30-day suspensions for clicking "like" on a controversial Facebook posting, which had already resulted in the resignation of the original posting firefighter. Sounds crazy, you say? [Check out this tale](#) from Hampton, VA. That's a posting from fire lawyer and blogger Curt Varone.

What exactly are the rights for public employees regarding protected public speech, and using such mechanisms as a Facebook like button? Sounds like the courts are still working that out, at least from what I read on [Curt Varone's Fire Law blog](#). (Don't believe the Supreme Court has yet ruled on this aspect of social media...) Readers more knowledgeable than myself (meaning everyone) are welcome to comment. As for the story out of Columbus, Miss., see this [Fire Law posting](#) and this [Statter911 posting](#).

Next question, how can Joe Q. Responder use social media and in a manner that doesn't threaten their job? Based on the above example, it includes watching both what you say (posted words) and what you do (clicking Like). What are particular examples of do's and don't's? Maybe we'll readers tackle that one, to start. (And for heaven's sake, leave the blogging to experienced nut cases like the Hawaiian Shirt Guy!)

Fine line... Nah. The best way too use social media (specifically FB) so it does not threaten you job is to NOT POST job related items that are even slightly questionable. Highlight your profession and demonstrate the goodness emergency responders exemplify. Say: "Good job" and "atta-boy" a little more. Don't post photos and comments that detract from your professionalism. Simply "Think before you click" – it's just that easy!

Regardless of one's interpretation of "rights" to speech, and the offense you may impart to another; the perception of another person does not truly consider "your" individual rights, only their own. On the other hand, in addition to SM being entertainment for many where we have fun with friends and family, it remains as a very powerful medium for communicating useful information to a lot of people; especially if used wisely (key word: "wisely"). "LIKE"

A.C. Rich - 09/05/12 - 22:46

Agencies are conscious of how they are portrayed in the public eye, including social media. Individual comments may be perceived as a bad reflection on the employer.

Good rule of thumb- If it feels good saying it, it is probably not the thing to say.

DJ - 09/05/12 - 23:06

Politicians are scum. Thins is just another example. With the recent trends of politicization of the judiciary, things appear to be headed for the "gets worse before it gets better" realm. That's a pessimistic way to look at it but in the context of current hyper-partisanship, everything seems able to be weaponized, even opinions. I think of "Brave New World" and "1984." The 'thought police' are no longer a thing of dystopian fiction.

Bob - 09/05/12 - 23:38

Earlier this year, I started drafting some tips for using social media (and electronic communication). Here's my list so far, with a few additions:

FIRST AND FOREMOST – Don't transmit anything you wouldn't want the rest of the world to see. Meaning, your boss, your future boss, your spouse, your parents, your kids, your peers, your students, your local officials, your local law enforcement agency, etc.

POSTING ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE – Never say something about a second person that you wouldn't say to their face.

EXPECT SYSTEM FAILURES – Things will fail from time to time. You'll send an e-mail to a distribution list that was intended for a single person.

Your message marked "confidential" will be forwarded beyond the intended recipients. Your Facebook posting that's private will be screen-captured and shown elsewhere. Your video clip that you intended to delete will be found and viewed. Your file that you thought saved in a private directory will get saved in a public folder.

APOLOGIES AND EXPLANATIONS – Be prepared to apologize, to provide context, or offer an explanation, regarding both the content of what you transmitted and the actions of your transmitting. Even face-to-face verbal communication can be challenging. Sending messages using text or images can add to the complexity. Expect such situations as humor that you intended to be funny, but isn't perceived as funny. As well as confusion or misunderstanding.

SHOWING VERSUS TELLING – Chances are you have a camera within reach, and perhaps on your person at this moment. Need to communicate something quickly and accurate? Consider taking a picture. You'll spend less time showing than telling.

NAMED VERSUS ANONYMOUS – Expect a different reaction to your online actions based on the use of your real name, versus an veiled or anonymous nickname, versus an purely anonymous name. Notably in conversations, such as blogs and discussion boards.

DEGREES OF PARALYSIS – All of the above concerns can be negated by avoiding any social media use. Meaning, don't use it and don't have to worry about using it. (You can still be affected by it, however. See below.) Or, you might use social media, but find yourself increasingly anxious as you read such cautionary advice above. Be prepared for such feelings!

Tips for living in a world with social media

CAMERAS ARE EVERYWHERE – Expect that your actions will, at some point, be observed by someone that you didn't expect was watching. Don't want to seen doing something you shouldn't? Allow me to quote John Madden, once asked something like "how do you keep from swearing around people?" He answered "I don't swear when I am by myself."

YOU CAN BE TALKED ABOUT – Google your name and you might be surprised that there's stuff about you "out there." There might be even be people talking about, citing your actions, or quoting your words. Might be accurate representations, might not. Use that information to learn about yourself and the effects you are having on others. Maybe it'll be useful.

LEARN TO TYPE, WRITE BETTER – Here's an easy start. Read what you write out loud. Not mumbling and under your breath. But with your speaking voice. Stand up. Read it right there. Pretend a person is listening. You'll very quickly learn how your words sound, and how you can improve them as needed.

Tips for using Facebook, or at least how Mike operates

PERIODIC PURGING – Every few months, I'll find my oldest wall postings, and commence deleting. Work backwards for a few months.

FOLDERS FOR PHOTOS – Every few months as well, I'll create a new folder for wall and mobile photos. Then I'll delete the prior folder, which will cause both the pictures AND all associated comments to be deleted.

DELETING OR EATING MY WORDS – More than a few times, I'll have second thoughts about something I've posted to my wall or to someone else's wall. I'll delete. And maybe send a private message with an explanation, or even apology.

Tips for dealing with human beings, using social media or just in person:

ACTIONS AND FEELINGS – What you do (actions) are noticed and remembered by others. How people felt (feelings) during and after your actions are remembered, and maybe long after your actions. Be kind.

Legeros - 09/06/12 - 07:22

The above comment by "Bob" is in fact NOT Bob Pascucci. For purposes of career retention at my municipal place of employment, I would like to point out that this "Bob" is not me.

On the topic of social media, I refrain from saying or doing anything that I couldn't sit in front of the Chief, the Town Manager, or the HR Director and explain in a positive manner. It is not worth my career to post an off-color comment or derogatory post on Facebook, this blog, or

anywhere for that matter. People like to argue that they have "rights," and you do in fact have the right to free speech in this country. You employer also has the right in this state to fire you for exercising that right in a manner that they deem as defaming the organization or municipality. Whether on or off duty, you are the face of your department. Just because you sit behind a keyboard and rattle off some opinion does not make it any different than if you proclaimed it over the PA system on your fire apparatus. Computers do not offer anonymity or immunity.

Bob P. - 09/06/12 - 13:59

My above post should have the word "try" in front of refrain! Nobody is perfect, you just have to hope that nobody notices when your filter is off.

Bob P. - 09/06/12 - 17:22

Let's extend our thinking on this puppy and get really crazy. Say someone posts a fire photo. Someone off-duty, or even a citizen photog, like myself. Say a house fire, with a big mess of flames.

The shot is posted to Facebook, maybe by me, maybe by someone else. Then the Likes start happening. If you're a responder, does your "Like" become an inappropriate form of expression? Does it have the potential, if a headline appears somewhere "firefighters 'approve' of photo showing destroyed home."

Add an injury or fatality to the incident, and... you see where that can go. What do you think, truly crazy thinking now? Or logical (if perhaps far-fetched) extension of this issue?

Legeros - 09/07/12 - 08:15

One's perception = their reality. I find stuff on the internet amusing all of the time. However, people may find that offensive, because of the content. You may find a site like "The People of WalMart" amusing, but hit "like" and you are now a racist in many's minds. I think Bob P says it best. If you said something on Facebook or your blog that you cannot sit and explain to the county manager or mayor, then you are probably better off not saying it. Writing a blog myself has driven this home. There have been many times I have had something to say, but never published it. People get offended easily, and unless you can make a living at it, then it's better not to.

DJ - 09/07/12 - 09:20

Based on the linked story, there was no opinion of any substance other than "liking" something. Maybe Mr. Carter knew the sheriff's opponent personally and is a really nice guy. Regardless of the myriad inferences that could (and apparently were) be drawn, nothing objectionable was said (again, based on the article). The only reasonable scenario I see is the sheriff's ego could not handle the bruising that the "implied" criticism inflicted. The news is bloated with examples of politicians who are despicable human beings. Corruption, infidelity, graft, etc. Which is why I feel politicians are scum. Not all are, you say? Well, we don't hear much about them. Maybe the honorable ones should speak out more and not let the scum steal the limelight. I'd like to see the glass as half full but that seems harder and harder to do lately. They sought public office, hence they better be able to handle criticism from the body politic. Remember ye politicians, you work for us. Is public office a tough job? I'm sure it is. Is there more to it than I realize since I've never held office? I'm confident of that, but that doesn't obviate the responsibility to maintain the public trust.

I always treat others with the respect their words and actions deserve. I try never to jump to any conclusions and realize that I probably don't know the whole story. At some point, however, poor performance and conduct becomes all too evident; then, criticism needs to be levied. If a shady politician disrespects their office and the public they serve by philandering or taking kickbacks (etc.), they should not expect respect in return. Basically, that sheriff should have the integrity to stand behind his performance and meet legitimate criticism with a defensible counterpoint. Anything other than that is hiding behind the position/office and abusing their power. I feel I'm going to start rambling, so I better quit before I jump off the deep end. If I offended anyone, oh well, they are only words. I can handle it if you don't agree with me.

Bob (without the P.) - 09/11/12 - 23:00

Name: (real name
preferred)

E-mail: (optional)

Web Site: (optional)

Remember personal info?

Yes

No