

How Much Should Your Customers Know About You?

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Thanks to Facebook, some of my customers know that I am sometimes online in the wee hours. And they can see some not-so-flattering pictures of me. Nothing unprofessional, mind you, just me showing my age. (My young friends think they're a hoot.)

In spite of the occasional controversy, people are giving up their privacy voluntarily, in ways that would shock George Orwell. But businesspeople have always had to give up some privacy and talk about ourselves in order to develop business relationships. That's what chambers of commerce and the like have always existed to foster.

We are now blurring the lines between personal and business life further. We are telling the world what we are doing and thinking, through status updates on Facebook and LinkedIn, and on Twitter.

Is this a good thing? Like many people, my first reaction to Twitter was, "I really don't want to know about my business colleagues' pets." I am interested in their professional activities, and it's nice to know that everything's okay during a natural disaster.

But as time passes, I'm discovering that people who use Twitter and status updates wisely are giving me a window into how they think -- information that may make me more likely to do business with them. Of course, I'm also seeing posts I consider offensive. Those folks won't get my business.

So I'm now of the opinion that while my participation in social networks should definitely be kept professional, a little personal information can help current and potential clients know me better.

But I need to be mindful of my audiences. In the case of Facebook and LinkedIn, I know who can read my posts, and I write them accordingly. Facebook's demographic is still much younger, although that is changing rapidly. Twitter is more problematic, as I've set the account to be open, so I need to be more careful.

And I get annoyed with people who post too often, and who always post identical comments to a number of social networks. While I do like services such as Ping.fm that allow me to post to multiple networks easily, I use these sparingly.

For me, then, effective communication on social networks is like effective communication in any setting: know your audience, stay on message, and, while a little personal information can help build relationships, don't overdo it.