Marriage and Social Media:
Risks, Benefits, and Best Practices

Overnight, it seems, the so-called "social media" of the cybersphere — Facebook, Linkedin, Twitter, Pinterest, and a host of similar but lesser known sites — have come to dominate the cultural landscape. This is true not only here in the United States but throughout the developed and developing world. Suddenly it's hard to find anybody who *isn't* involved in social networking on the Web. That includes married couples, of course, and this raises a number of significant questions about the implications of online social interaction for the institution of marriage. Are social media beneficial for couples? Or could their use possibly impact a husband-wife relationship in negative ways? It all depends on how they are utilized.

With this in mind, we'd like to suggest several "best practices" for husbands and wives who are involved with social media. This will be followed by two additional lists, the first detailing some of the possible benefits of online networking, and the second spelling out a number of noteworthy pitfalls or risks.

Best Practices

1. *Shared passwords*. The primary recommendation we have for couples using Facebook and similar social media sites is that they maintain an "open door policy." In other words, we strongly recommend that spouses share their passwords with one another, both as a gesture of mutual respect and as a way of ensuring accountability. Their respective Facebook profiles should make it clear that they are married to one another. Icons, photos, and other visual images should be designed to remind visitors that they are married. As far as possible, posted pictures should frequently show husband and wife *together*. Everything should be expressed to reflect the couple's identity as a *unit*. If desired, couples can prevent unwanted searches by making full use of their privacy settings. They can also set up the same access groups on both pages, insuring that each spouse is sharing only with the same group of people. In cases where a greater degree of accountability is required or recommended, spouses may decide to set up a new shared "family" account instead. This type of joint account does have its limitations for the practical use of social media, but in situations where it is necessary to preserve the integrity of the marriage relationship, we would not advise against these safeguards.

2. *Wise use of access features*. In setting up their Facebook profile, married couples ought to think carefully about the amount of personal information they'd like to include and the details they want to provide (as noted above, they should definitely specify that they are married and provide the spouse's name). Limitation features and levels of accessibility should be implemented with an eye to protecting the marriage relationship and maintaining an appropriate degree of privacy.

3. *Establish boundaries.* Before launching out into the world of social media, husbands and wives should sit down together and discuss their expectations. What are each partner's thoughts and feelings about appropriate online interaction with persons outside the circle of their marriage and immediate family? What are the ground rules for accepting friend requests? How should such a request be handled if it happens to come from one of the spouses' "old flames?" How much time should they be spending on Facebook as compared with time spent together in face-to-face conversation? It helps to agree on boundaries and guidelines up front. There are a number of Internet accountability and filtering programs available that can help couples establish a plan and stick with it once it's in place.

4. *Give careful thought to the number of devices you use to access your account.* In connection with this last point, we think it's a good idea for couples to think carefully about the number of electronic devices they use to log on to social media. Individuals who lack discipline may end up wasting a lot of time online if they're set up to access Facebook via phone, laptop, *and* iPad, as well as on a home computer. On the other hand, people who are effective time managers may actually *save* time by using a portable device to access social media during opportune and less-intrusive moments, such as while sitting in the doctor's waiting room. Doing so may actually create more "face-to-face" time with family and friends. The key is to *use* the tools available to serve *your* purposes and strategies rather than allowing them to dominate you.

5. *Encourage and edify.* "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth," says Paul in Ephesians 4:29, "but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." This is a good rule for all Facebook and Twitter users, but it has a special application for married couples. We suggest that spouses look upon social media as a means of edifying one another and building one another up, not only in private communication but also in messages intended for a broader audience — much as they might compliment one another at a party or social gathering.

6. *Go slow.* There's a tendency in online communication and networking to allow the speed and easy access of the medium to influence the tone and character of

our human interactions. People need to be careful not to get ahead of themselves, not to be led astray by momentary emotions, not to speak first and think later, not to read too much into someone else's words, and not to jump to unwarranted conclusions about "relationships" with "friends" who are really nothing more than cyber-acquaintances.

7. *Post with discernment.* A good general rule of thumb is, "Don't post anything on Facebook that you wouldn't care to see printed on the front page of the newspaper." If followed rigorously, this guideline will spare users a lot of trouble and embarrassment.

8. *Exemplify good practices.* When children are part of the picture, mom and dad should be careful to model all these "best practices" for the kids in their own use of social media. In so doing, they won't simply be teaching the kids how to handle themselves online — they'll be taking advantage of yet another good reason to hold themselves accountable.

Potential Benefits

1. *Connectivity.* Social media serve marriages best when they are used to maintain a healthy connection between spouses during the workday or while one of the partners is traveling. A husband or wife on a business trip can use his or her Facebook page to share new experiences with the entire family and to give them a sense of participating in the journey. It's also a good way to hold oneself accountable by keeping her loved ones posted on one's activities and whereabouts.

2. *Accountability.* The significance of this last benefit can be expanded beyond the circle of the marriage itself. Friends can help both men and women stay faithful to their spouses and true to their marriage vows. That includes Facebook friends as well as those of any other description.

3. *Enhancing relationships.* Some research has indicated that social media, when used appropriately, can actually add intensity and immediacy to face-to-face relationships. When used as a *supplement to* (rather than as a *replacement for*) flesh-and-blood contact with another human being, online communication can add new layers of intimacy and understanding to our interactions with those we love — as, for example, when a Facebook message supplies the necessary background for an important conversation and eliminates the need for a lot of preliminary explanation. This feature has obvious advantages for married couples. Social media can also be a useful springboard to new relationships and friendships.

4. *Walking in the light.* Husbands and wives who connect with old friends via a *shared* Facebook account may sometimes have unprecedented opportunities to enter into the details of one another's personal histories. This can be tricky. It might become a source of tension, suspicion, or jealousy if one of the partners' old high school flames decides to put in a "friend" request. But such developments can also be healthy and beneficial if they have the effect of eliminating secrets and shining a light on the past. Everything depends on the couple in question and how they choose to handle such revelations.

5. *Community.* The healthiest marriages are those linked into a vibrant support group. Couples need other couples, and social media can be an effective tool for networking, discovering common interests with friends, setting up fellowship groups, organizing events, and coordinating get-togethers.

Possible Risks and Pitfalls

1. *Virtual Reality vs. Actual Reality.* So-called *virtual reality* is an ever-present aspect of *all* forms of cyber-culture. That includes social media. Users are wise to bear this in mind. Once they log on to Facebook or Twitter, *some* people have a tendency to slip into a different psychological "zone." Without even realizing it, they can assume the attitude of another person living a "parallel life" in a "parallel world." This mental shift finds expression in a number of different negative ways, including:

   - Suspension of normal inhibitions.
   - Temptation to live in a fantasy world.
   - Altered standards of privacy.
   - Disregard for manners and appropriate boundaries.

2. *Anonymity.* Closely connected with this last point is the potential for secrecy and anonymity that characterizes most Internet-based activities. Ironically, social media such as Facebook and MySpace can be as *faceless* and *nameless* as the individual user chooses to make them. It's easy to pretend to be someone you're not. By the same token, there's no way to be sure that the person on the other end is really who *he* claims to be.

3. *Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, and Narcissism.* When users have the luxury of hiding behind an assumed identity or a veil of anonymity, the effect in *some* instances and with *some* personalities is to encourage a sense of *license*. This can lead to all kinds of unsavory online social behaviors, including "stalking," spying, unwarranted boasting, deception, misrepresentation of facts, and self-promotion.

4. *Vulnerability to Predators and Opportunists.* While in most cases narcissism and exhibitionism are merely obnoxious and annoying, there *are* occasions when they cross the line of propriety and become a form of *victimization*. Facebook users who fail to pay proper attention to the privacy and access features of their accounts can open themselves up to the schemes of advertisers, charlatans, Ponzi artists, and even dangerous sexual predators.

5. *Potential Loss of Privacy.* This last point leads to a related thought. Under our "Best Practices" heading we suggested that it's wise to avoid posting anything on social media that you wouldn't want to see published in the news. It's important to realize that something closely resembling publication *can* sneak up on you if you're not careful. Once you've put something out there, you have no way of controlling the forwards and second-postings to which it *might* be subjected by "friends" and "friends of friends." So think before you type. It's also worth mentioning that the membership terms grant to Facebook the legal rights to all material posted by its users.

6. *Best Foot Forward.* A less harmful but equally misleading form of self-misrepresentation via social media involves the understandable tendency most people have to reveal only the best and most attractive aspects of their lives to Facebook friends. Harmless as this is in most instances, it can potentially give rise to conflicts, jealousy, envy, covetousness, and rivalry. It can also lead to discontent and depression when photos of your friends' new baby or recent trip to Hawaii leave you with the feeling that "other people" get all the breaks.

7. *Too Much Too Soon.* The speed, brevity, ease, and immediacy of online connections can sometimes create the illusion of genuine friendship where in fact there is nothing more than a very superficial and artificial "virtual" link with another person. The formation of *real* friendship requires time, patience, shared experience, and lots of personal, face-to-face interaction.

8. *Isolation.* As mentioned above, social media can enhance genuine friendships and relationships when used as a *supplement* to face-to-face contacts. But when social media are allowed to *replace* real-life interaction, they may encourage the user to withdraw into a "virtual" world of his or her own making. If permitted to progress too far, this tendency may even become pathological.

Related Articles

- [Should married couples have separate social media accounts and separate passwords?](#)
- [Is it okay to "friend" an old flame on Facebook?](#)
- [Should I accept a "friend" request on Facebook from an old flame of mine?](#)

- How should I respond if my spouse receives flirtatious or inappropriate messages on Facebook?
- Is it okay to "vent" about my spouse and marriage on Facebook?
- Should I share about my marriage problems on Facebook with a friend of the opposite sex?
- I'm married. Is it okay to chat online or send private messages to someone of the opposite sex?
- Social media guidelines for interaction with members of the opposite sex
  How can I tell if social media is having a negative impact on my marriage?
- How can we use social media to strengthen our marriage?
- How can we protect our marriage against the potential pitfalls of social media?
- How do I keep social media from dominating my life?

Additional Helps

Resources
Making Marriage Work in a Social Media World (broadcast)
Friendship or Flirtation: Danger Signs for Couples (broadcast)
Facebook and Your Marriage
Hedges: Loving Your Marriage Enough to Protect It
Boundaries in Marriage
Unfriend Yourself: Three Days to Detox, Discern, and Decide About Social Media

Referrals
Covenant Eyes

Articles
Facebook and Your Marriage
Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?
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Stalking Your "Ex" on Facebook

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