



By **Jeff Morgan**

Are you protecting your most valuable assets?

IMPROPER SOCIAL MEDIA USE CAN HURT YOUR REPUTATION AND BUSINESS

As a business owner, you understand the importance of managing and protecting your tangible assets, such as your property, inventory, equipment and employees.

However, I would argue that two of the greatest assets that you rely upon have no direct tangible cost or value. In fact, I would suggest they are invaluable as they are likely to have the greatest impact on your success

I am referring to your business reputation and the relationships you have with your customers.

While these are your most powerful assets, they also are your most fragile. Because of this, it is vital that you protect them.

The speed of information that social media and smartphone technology have created makes these assets even more fragile.

We all know that an upset customer can go onto social media and express his or her dissatisfaction for the world to see, even discouraging others from doing business with you.

While this is a continuous concern, you can take proactive steps to reduce the potential damage.

Ensuring that each customer is satisfied and happy before leaving your store is a simple and effective step.

If that step is missed, focusing on quickly making the situation right for the upset customer can help mitigate the damage.

However, if you think that reputational damage caused by social media and other forms of instantaneous communication comes only from external sources, you can be in for a very rude awakening.

Too often, the behavior of your employees — whether while using their smartphones or posting information on platforms like Facebook and Twitter — can have an even more damaging effect on how your business is perceived.

If there are not clearly spelled out expectations, parameters and policies regarding how your employees interact with these things, the reputation of your business and your relationship with customers can suffer.

Leaving it to each person's "best judgement" can be disastrous.

Let me share a few examples. In the headlines recently there was a situation where a female customer at a tire dealership was receiving harassing text messages from someone identifying himself as a manager of the store she had just left.

Among the pieces of personal information that the customer provided when she brought her vehicle to the location was her cell phone number.

When her vehicle was finished, she paid for the services and left.

Not too long after that, an individual from the store took it upon himself to extract her cell phone number from the store's

database and send her a text message, which included information about her appearance — even what she was wearing that day — and enthusiastically expressed his "approval" of her. (I am being gentle in describing the content of his text messages.)

This individual also used an app that masked the source of the text so it could not be traced.

Naturally, the customer was very upset. She returned to the store to confront its manager.

He denied that he sent the text messages. He looked up the number that the messages came from to see if it belonged to an employee. Nothing matched.

She received more messages after she left the store. Unable to work with the dealership to stop the unwanted messages, she is now pursuing legal action.

The sender of those text messages clearly crossed the line by using the customer's personal information, which had been provided to the dealership for business purposes.

While this may seem like an extreme situation, how often does this happen and not get reported? What other ways could an employee have used a customer's personal information for his or her own purposes?

Maybe an employee could be reaching out to a customer to do some side work? ("Hey, if you want to bring your car to my house, I can do that job for less and save you a lot of money.")

Stealing protected customer information for an employee's personal gain is theft. And it can hurt your company's reputation

and business.

Another recent example comes from the world of social media. A technician who is very active on social media was impressed with a high-performance vehicle that a customer had dropped off at his store for basic scheduled maintenance.

The store's manager was not present at the time.

The tech posted pictures of himself with the car, while in the shop. He didn't think it was a big deal. He had done it several times before.

Then he decided it would be fun to film himself doing burnouts with the vehicle in the store's parking lot, which he also posted and forwarded.

It did not take long for these posts to be liked, commented on and shared. Eventually, the vehicle owner saw the videos. To say he was upset is an understatement.

He brought the videos to the store manager's attention. The manager, who was caught off-guard, apologized and tried to explain that this behavior was the sole responsibility of the tech

IT IS ESSENTIAL TO CLEARLY SPELL OUT EXPECTATIONS, PARAMETERS AND POLICIES FOR YOUR EMPLOYEES.



Give your employees a path to follow by providing clarity on the usage of social media, smartphones and customer information.

and not representative of his business. In this case, the individual involved was easily identified.

But the customer still decided not to do business with the store again.

“Even if this one individual acted independently, why did others within the business let it happen?” he wondered. And he was justified in asking that question.

He concluded that even if this person acted independently, the culture of the dealership must be one in which unprofessional behavior is accepted and maybe even encouraged.

It should not have mattered if the manager was there or not. This violation of trust would not have happened in a place where a professional culture exists.

These two examples, while different, demonstrate that if expectations are not clearly explained and enforced, an employee's individual actions using social media and other technologies could do extreme harm to your business and its reputation in the community.

You might be thinking that you know your employees well enough. You might be convinced that these things would never happen in your business. The reality is that they happen.

It's important to keep in mind that employees might not be aware of the damage that can be done as the result of inappropriate smartphone and social media use.

That's why it's even more important to have clear expectations and policies in place regarding use of social media and smartphones, as well as the protection of personal customer information.

Write these policies down. Have your human resource partners review them.

Ask your employees sign off on them. Revisit them with your employees regularly.

Some examples might include:

Social media usage: Prohibit employees from making personal posts that disparage, threaten, or could otherwise harm the reputation of your business, its customers or fellow employees.

Cellphone usage: Prohibit cell phone usage while operating a vehicle and equipment. Consider limiting where cell phones can

be used, including inside your service bays. This is as much for safety as anything else.

Customer information: Prohibit the use of customer information for any activity outside of conducting normal business, including any personal use.

Remember that any policy you enact is only as good as the employees who are held accountable to it. First, you need to set the example by following these policies yourself.

Additionally, the penalties for violating any of these policies need to be strictly enforced.

It must be made clear that any violation could lead to disciplinary action up to, and including, termination. You need to enforce disciplinary actions consistently and swiftly.

You set the tone. Any policy violation that is ignored becomes accepted. Soon, others will feel that it is OK to ignore the policy, as well. That behavior will then become the norm. Unfortunately, at that point, enforcement becomes difficult.

For example, if you try to enforce a policy with one employee when others have done the same thing with no disciplinary action, you set yourself up for claims of unfair work practices.

To avoid that, simply stay consistent in enforcing your rules.

You need to protect your dealership's reputation and customer relationships as strongly as you protect any other asset.

Making it clear to employees what is expected of them and what behaviors are unacceptable is a great step in the right direction.

We all hope and expect that our employees will always do the right thing. Otherwise, you probably would not have hired them.

But don't leave it to chance.

By providing clarity on expectations for usage of social media, smartphones and customer data, you are giving your employees a clear path to follow, which will help your company avoid the loss of the reputation and customer relationships you have worked so hard over many years to build. ■

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