Online Communities Make Faces Stick Out in a Crowd

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Before a few weeks ago, I had never heard of Kevin Colvin. I'm fairly certain the young bank intern from Massachusetts had no intention of revealing his identity to unknown, casual users of Facebook like me either. Nonetheless, Colvin became a reluctant Internet sensation after violating this unpatented social media slogan — what happens on Facebook, doesn't necessarily stay on Facebook.

Colvin's descent into Internet infamy began innocently enough with an e-mail to his employers explaining a sudden departure from work. The correspondence read: *Paul/Jill – I just wanted to let you know that I will not be able to come into work tomorrow. Something came up at home and I had to go to New York this morning for the next couple of days. I apologize for the delayed notice. Kind regards, Kevin.*

Something had come up, but it wasn't a family emergency. Instead, Colvin's urgent transmission was used as a ruse to attend a Halloween party in his home town of Worcester, Mass. The event was documented by attendees via digital photo and the images were promptly posted to Facebook.

Colvin may or may not have been aware that the photos had found their way onto the Internet. He also may or may not have known that his boss was Facebook savvy and had decided to do some fact-checking on Kevin's weekend whereabouts. What he uncovered was certainly a violation of employer/employee trust. A photo featuring Colvin dressed in a fairy costume, smothered in glitter and wielding a can of cheap beer and a wand overwhelmingly indicated that the family emergency had been a fib.

Kevin's boss humorously replied to Colvin's original message by attaching the photo and blind carbon copying their entire office. The message read: *Kevin – Thanks for letting us know – hope everything is ok in New York. (Cool wand). Cheers.*

This anecdote, while very amusing, illustrates the importance of practicing responsibility in an age of immediate and extremely accessible information. The entire communication landscape has changed, and with it, has brought tremendous challenges for military members. While we embrace social media sites, and use them to exchange ideas and maintain connectivity with friends and family while mobilized, commanders are legitimately concerned about operational security. How do we manage the use of social media effectively to deliver positive messages without tearing down public perception of our organization because of those who use sites and web tools irresponsibly? Many would suggest we should just cut the dragon's head off completely. I disagree. Here are a few statistics for the naysayers:

> **"The way we communicate our message is dictated by our entire force."**

- By 2010, Generation Y, or the Millennial Generation, will outnumber Baby Boomers … 96 percent of them have joined a social network.
- If Facebook were a country it would be the world's fourth largest, ranking between the United States and Indonesia.
- There are more than 200 million blogs.
- Social networks and blogs are the fourth most popular online activities, which includes beating the use of personal e-mail.
- Around 64 percent of marketers are using social media for five hours or more each week during campaigns, with 39 percent using it for 10 or more hours per week. (*Information compiled by http://econsultancy.com and http://socialnomics.net)*

Master Sgt. Mike R. Smith

Jack Harrison, director of National Guard Bureau Public Affairs (second from left) presents a National Guard Heritage print titled "9-11" to members of the North Dakota National Guard Public Affairs Office, including Staff Sgt. Billie Jo Lorius, Lt. Col. Rick Smith and Staff Sgt. Amy Wieser Willson. The print and corresponding award was for Excellence in Public Communications in support of Domestic Operations for the team's communications support during North Dakota spring 2009 flooding. Social media sites, such as Flickr, Facebook and Twitter, allowed for the dissemination of critical emergency flood information to a wider audience. Much of the team, including Capt. Dan Murphy, who led the public affairs efforts during the flood, are deployed to Kosovo.

From a public affairs standpoint, we cannot afford to be a meek voice that uses reactionary methods for information engagement. This couldn't have been demonstrated any more comprehensively than during North Dakota's historic flood fight in the spring of 2009. By using social media methods, we were able to deliver critical information to the general public in a timely manner, helping to minimize the loss of property and contribute to the safety of our communities. We were also able to tell the N.D. National Guard's story more effectively.

The way we communicate our message is dictated by our entire force. Please use caution when using social media sites. Remember that you are the message. Your appearance and actions hold more significance and implications than you may be aware of. Kevin Colvin learned through an embarrassing ordeal that what goes out on social media sites can always come back — most the time unannounced and in an awkward fashion. Don't be naïve in thinking that no one is looking because at least 300 million Facebook users are.