

LOOSE LIPS SINK SHIPS

By: Robert S. Sher

Recently a friend told me a story about an employee who used the Facebook wall to boast about working with a high-ranking executive at a major corporation in town. The employee posted the name of the executive as well as the name of the company for all of his Facebook friends to see. Not surprisingly, these musings made their way to the executive suite and the guy at the top was not amused.

While the employee's motive was not malicious and he got off with a verbal warning, he violated my cardinal rule of communication; never say anything to anyone you don't want someone else to know. It is a fairly simple rule; one that is just as easy to break as it is to follow. Still, it is a good model for us to try to follow, especially when doing business.

As the tools we use to say things continuously change with the Internet and the onslaught of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, this message of caution is more critical than ever. Loose lips sink ships whether you say something, send it in an email or post it on a Facebook wall.

Think before you speak. Think twice before you click send, share or post. You cannot erase what you say no matter how you deliver the message.

We all need to be more careful in what we say and how we say it. I made a foolish remark to a friend a few months ago and I know I hurt his feelings. I apologized and he graciously accepted but I am so embarrassed the relationship has suffered.

When it comes to idle chitchat, clearly some topics are better than others. Television, movies and sports are easy topics; politics, religion and your boss's private life can get you into trouble. Know your audience.

If you start with the premise that nothing is private, keeping your lips zipped might be easier. Do you want someone bragging on line about working with you? You might, but you might not. So don't do it about some else unless you're sure you know that the other person does not care.

The employee I mentioned earlier in this column assumed his executive would not care about – or would not see – the wall post. It doesn't matter what the assumption was, he did not care and the employee's reputation is a bit tarnished whether he knows it or not.

Want to stay out of trouble? Make it your business to keep work matters at work and off the Internet. Don't brag about your client list at networking events. Do not talk about clients. In casual conversations and in print, Comerica should be called "major bank". If you are talking about the Ford CEO, call him a manufacturing executive. Just be subtle.

Do not post items about your boss or your company on the Internet. I have heard too many stories about inappropriate conversations using these tools to repeat them all.

Remember, once the words are out of your mouth or you hit “send” on the email, you are no longer in control. You cannot control how your words are interpreted or repeated or where that email or post goes. Someone once told me words are like stones; once you throw them out, you can never take them back.

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