

1.4.2: Being Ethical Online

Learning Objectives

- Describe how to communicate ethically online

If it says so online, it must be true!

That's the joke of researching and reporting facts you find on the internet. If you believe everything you see out there, then you might believe that the United States has a giant "earthquake gun" and that Bat Boy was an advisor to the Clinton White House. Some of these less-than-subtle fibs are easy to spot and debunk. But other so-called facts aren't as easy to spot and can sneak into our business communications if we're not diligent in our fact checking.

Internet ethics are multi-faceted and far reaching. There are ethics to consider when you post to the internet. There are more ethics to consider when you use information you found on the internet. The internet provides all kinds of opportunity to trip up good communicators and drop them right into the middle of an ethical conundrum. Post information online with caution, and always be skeptical about the information you find there!

Posting

Don't post non-factual information on the internet, and if you do, promptly correct errors. When you post information online on behalf of your business, you owe your co-workers and all your external readers truthful information. When you communicate, you work hard to develop a relationship of trust with your audience, whether they're reading you or listening to you speak. Passing along information that's not trustworthy is damaging to your reputation as much as it's damaging to your message.

Don't post questionable information anonymously. Just because you don't put your name on it doesn't mean you're not responsible for facilitating an incorrect, untruthful message. Again, you're damaging the level of trust you've developed for yourself as well as a reader's trust in the information.

Be careful about sharing proprietary information, information that violates patient confidentiality or attorney-client privilege. We talked a little earlier about how the lines between professional and personal communications are blurring. It's easy to make a mistake and post a picture of yourself and your patient and say, "That kidney transplant has been very successful!" Even if you work for the Cleveland Clinic, that's not appropriate unless you have the correct forms from the patient saying it's okay to release that information. In addition, if you're a lawyer and your client posts something on your Facebook wall about his trial, that's also not terribly ethical. Don't leave it up on your wall. Take it down and contact your client by phone.

Using Materials from the Internet

Fact check information you pull off the internet. Sources like trusted news magazines and newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, etc.) usually don't publish until their facts have been checked and verified, but if you find information on John Doe's website, you should definitely research that data further. It's your duty to your reader and your company to report data correctly.

Don't take things off the internet and use them as your own. If you do not acquire written material, images or video someone else has posted to the internet in an appropriate manner, you are stealing—and stealing is unethical. Now, there is such a thing as "[fair use](#)," which makes it okay to use these materials for the purpose of "criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching (including multiple copies for classroom use), scholarship, or research..." If you fall into one of those categories, you're safe. Otherwise, your use of the material is considered a violation of copyright law. Look for the "creative commons" distinction on images and video to confirm that it's appropriate for shared use. We'll talk more about the use of visuals in Module 5: Visual Media.

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