



Social Networking and Cooperative Extension

Social networking was once the proprietary space for university and college students and staff; it has now become a part of many work and family lives as well. Because it is a feature-rich way to keep in touch, share information and create community, popular social networking tools such as Facebook and MySpace have flourished. As of May 2008, Facebook has over 70 million users and growing. Currently, Facebook is more widely used by Cooperative Extension than MySpace.

Facebook Use in Cooperative Extension

Core to Facebook is the “My Friends” tool where people who know each other can “friend” each other, sharing a personal profile. Facebook also allows groups to form around a common topic. These groups can be public or private (members-only). Some early public Facebook groups that are Extension-related include:

- Cooperative Extension (eXtension – national)
- Cooperative Extension Second Life
- Extension Information Technologists
- Cooperative Extension Web Designers and Developers
- Cooperative Extension Photographers
- Access 4-H Facebook Community (National)
- St. Croix County 4-H (Wisconsin)

These early Facebook groups are communicating the latest information about themselves, creating community through shared work-related interest and inviting group members to attend training events.

The use of Facebook (and other social networking tools) is growing among Cooperative Extension employees, volunteers and youth involved in 4-H. Access to social-networking tools is sometimes denied because of the perception that the use of Facebook is not work-related. The Extension work-related use of Facebook is already in place and is growing. No longer should UWEX Cooperative Extension faculty and staff be hampered by being unable to access these website tools through work-related email and computer accounts.

Privacy of personal information should be guarded, however. The default privacy settings for Facebook leave personal information wide open to be mined by unintended strangers. By carefully setting privacy settings, one can avoid this pitfall.

Privacy setting tips for Facebook

When you create a Facebook profile/account, the default settings are very open. Basically, everyone in your “Network” (for example, “Wisconsin Staff”) can see your

profile and all the information you have put on it. To set tighter restrictions on who can see what is in your profile, click on “Privacy” in the upper right corner. Then go through the settings, one-by-one to set a level that is comfortable with you. Here are some recommended privacy settings:

1. Set most of the settings to “only my friends” or “only me”.
2. For Search, allow it to search for you, but uncheck the option that people who search can see “my friends” list. Uncheck the option that allows public search engines to find you in Facebook.
3. For the news and mini-feed (short messages that update your friends on your Facebook activity), uncheck the following options: Remove profile info, remove my relationship status, leave a group, leave a network and show times in mini-feed.
4. Tagging photos (clicking on an image in Facebook and typing in the name of the person/”friend” in the photo) – you can “tag” other Facebook members in photos, but this opens up some privacy concerns. When you tag someone in a photo – even in a private group – the photo is accessible through that person’s profile. So, I recommend for privacy concerns, please don’t tag photos that you don’t want to become more public. This doesn’t mean that you can’t comment on a photo; just don’t use the tag tool. Of course, the best way to not have a questionable photo public is to not post it in Facebook (or on the Internet).
5. Deleting a Facebook profile – Facebook profiles are “deactivated” when you leave Facebook. What this means is that the information and files are still stored on Facebook’s servers unless you request in writing to delete your account permanently.

Some useful Facebook tip sites:

<http://techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page7430.cfm>

<http://internetducttape.com/2007/03/08/how-to-use-facebook-without-losing-your-job-over-it/>

http://www.businessweek.com/playbook/07/0806_1.htm

General Social Networking Personal Safety Tips

(<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/tech/tec14.shtm>)

The Federal Trade Commission suggests these tips for socializing safely online:

- Think about how different sites work before deciding to join a site. Some sites will allow only a defined community of users to access posted content; others allow anyone and everyone to view postings.
- Think about keeping some control over the information you post. Consider restricting access to your page to a select group of people, for example, your friends from school, your club, your team, your community groups, or your family.

- Keep your information to yourself. Don't post your full name, Social Security number, address, phone number, or bank and credit card account numbers — and don't post other people's information, either. Be cautious about posting information that could be used to identify you or locate you offline. This could include the name of your school, sports team, clubs, and where you work or hang out.
- Make sure your screen name doesn't say too much about you. Don't use your name, your age, or your hometown. Even if you think your screen name makes you anonymous, it doesn't take a genius to combine clues to figure out who you are and where you can be found.
- Post only information that you are comfortable with others seeing — and knowing — about you. Many people can see your page, including your parents, your teachers, the police, the college you might want to apply to next year, or the job you might want to apply for in five years.
- Remember that once you post information online, you can't take it back. Even if you delete the information from a site, older versions exist on other people's computers.
- Consider not posting your photo. It can be altered and broadcast in ways you may not be happy about. If you do post one, ask yourself whether it's one your mom would display in the living room.
- Flirting with strangers online could have serious consequences. Because some people lie about who they really are, you never really know who you're dealing with.
- Be wary if a new online friend wants to meet you in person. Before you decide to meet someone, do your research: Ask whether any of your friends know the person, and see what background you can dig up through online search engines. If you decide to meet them, be smart about it: Meet in a public place, during the day, with friends you trust. Tell an adult or a responsible sibling where you're going, and when you expect to be back.
- Trust your gut if you have suspicions. If you feel threatened by someone or uncomfortable because of something online, tell an adult you trust and report it to the police and the social networking site. You could end up preventing someone else from becoming a victim.