

Facebook for Law Students: Making Friends (But Protecting Your Professional Reputation)

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Facebook is THE social networking site of choice for most people. With over 500 million active users (and growing every-day) it's unusual to encounter someone who's not on Facebook. As a law student, how should you be using Facebook and what are some of the risks?

As a general rule, Facebook should be used only for personal use — consider another social media tool (like [LinkedIn](#)) for professional contacts and communications. Many legal employers conduct due diligence and, as part of that, will search Facebook for information on applicants, paying close attention to anything that stands out as unprofessional, from your profile picture to your interests. Fair or not, employers (and prospective employers) judge you on your Facebook presence. There are many stories of otherwise highly qualified law students who have not received job offers from legal employers because of pictures or other information on their Facebook page that the employer considered immature or inappropriate. Employers may think that law students who exercise questionable judgment about information they share on their Facebook page cannot be trusted to exercise good judgment in handling client matters — and in this competitive job market, you cannot afford to have employers raise those concerns and risk a job offer. You can use and enjoy Facebook while still maintaining a professional image. Here are some guidelines:

GETTING STARTED.

Considering several important factors can help you create a social media strategy that can apply to all your social media tools, including Facebook and Twitter. These include *Profile*, *People*, and *Presence*, some of the factors Amanda Ellis outlines in-depth in *The 6Ps of the BIG 3™ for Job-Seeking JDs* (Something Different Publishing, Inc., 2010).

- **Profile:** Choose your profile photo wisely. Even if you set your privacy settings to the most restrictive level possible, anyone searching for you on Facebook will still see your profile photo. No pictures of you, drink in hand, at happy hour or posing in a swimsuit. Make it a

photo you would not be embarrassed to have a prospective employer see. Choose your privacy settings wisely to control what “non-friends” may be able to see. By restricting your privacy settings to a custom setting, and specifically selecting which of your friends will view your photos, posts, religious, and political views and places you check into, you minimize the risk that an employer, conducting due diligence, will stumble across information on your Facebook page. Be sure to set restrictive settings for “things others share.” Even if you are being cautious with the information that you post, your “friends” may not use the same level of care, and this is one way to help control your online presence. Facebook changes its privacy settings and defaults often, so stay on top of updates and frequently monitor your settings.

- **People:** Choose your friends wisely. Many career services advisors recommend using Facebook only for close personal friends, and using another social media tool such as [LinkedIn](#), for professional contacts like colleagues, co-workers, professors, supervisors, and others you may encounter in your work or law school life. You may receive friend requests from senior lawyers at your firm or clients. Rather than accepting their friend invitation, check to see if they are LinkedIn users, a more appropriate social media tool for professional contacts. If so, send a personalized message through LinkedIn, such as “Dear John, I recently received your friend invitation through Facebook. Although I restrict my Facebook use to a small circle of close friends, I would love to connect with you through LinkedIn.” If it is someone who is not on LinkedIn, consider sending them an email message to the same effect. Additionally, create “Friend Lists” to control the types of information from your Facebook page that will be visible to various parties.
- **Presence:** Consider what your Facebook profile and posts say about you to a prospective employer. Post wisely. Always think carefully about what you post for status updates and responses to friends’ posts. Even if your pages are private, your friends’ pages may be publicly accessible, allowing personal information you share on your friends’ pages to be accessible and

findable by an employer. Before posting or responding online, consider: Do you know your friends' privacy settings? Do you know who your friends' friends are? Never post anything online that you wouldn't want a prospective employer to see. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation count, too. Set Facebook email alerts to notify you of Wall postings and tagged pictures of you so you can respond quickly to remove any questionable material. Actively manage your presence. Review your Facebook presence frequently, and try to see the information through the eyes of a conservative employer (or a judge) to avoid any potential issues. On the flip side, Facebook posts can be used as a positive tool in marketing yourself and your skills. Consider only positive posts when commenting on your law school experience or work: Post something like "Just started my first day at the Department of Justice. So excited to be working with, and learning from, such incredible attorneys!" but NOT "Slogging through another motion to suppress ... yawn ... can't wait 'til quittin' time." Of

course, you should NEVER disclose any potentially confidential or personal information about your clients or the cases you are working on.

ONLINE ETIQUETTE.

As with any other social media tool, do not ever post anything a prospective employer might find questionable. Remember that law is a conservative profession. Your online reputation will follow you throughout your career and a momentary lapse in judgment can put your career at risk. When in doubt, don't.

LEARN MORE. Choose the "[About](#)" tab at the bottom of your Facebook page and then "[Resources](#)." Under the "[Need Help?](#)" tab, you will find a link to the Help Center, with detailed information about Facebook functions and security setting information. An excellent book for learning more is *The 6Ps of the BIG 3™ for Job-Seeking JDs* (Something Different Publishing, Inc., 2010).