

Behave Yourself

Protecting your personal brand on social media



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Contents



Introduction	3
Chapter I Establishing your Online Profile	4
Chapter II Mindful Posting Practices	6
Chapter III Protecting your Personal Brand	8
Chapter IV Online Crisis Management	9
Conclusion	11

INTRODUCTION

Hi, I'm Ruth Mthembu.

My first exposure to social media was in 2007 – Facebook and MySpace. I was in grade 9 when I created my first social media profile. With no manual to refer to, I got to know the platforms by clicking here and there. Social media did not play a massive role in my life, but there was so much excitement in me as I dropped my school bag on the floor in my room in the afternoon, and powered up the computer.

It was a whole different world – one where I could control what I wanted people to know about me. Soon after that, I downloaded MXit and Mig33. I was grouped in chats with people I knew, and people I didn't from a bar of soap.

Never did I think that social media would be the beast that it is today. Careers are built from one moment that goes viral, and one's success or downfall is one tweet, comment or photo away.

With that being said, you have a brand to protect – one that others may not ever come across or even know – **YOU**.

Your online footprint says a lot about you, and even when you think your old social media posts are out of sight and mind, someone will find a way to bring them back when you least expect it.

So, how do you maintain your personal brand online? Keep reading.

When you're done reading this eBook, subscribe to my website www.tact-fully.co and access articles and resources to help you communicate tactfully and professionally.



Establishing your online profile

Establishing the “why”

Why do you want to establish an online identity? Why would you like to create a Tik Tok or Instagram account? It’s valid to ask this question like you would when determining why you want to buy a car or study a certain course.

Create online profiles with a clear reason for it, even if that reason is: “for fun”.

This will help guide you accordingly. For example, if your reason to create a LinkedIn profile is to find job opportunities, that will help inform how you structure your profile, list your skills, and follow certain accounts.

Strive for impact

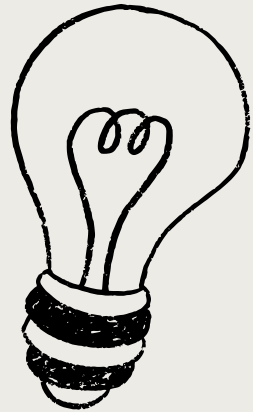
While it may be great to create an online profile to keep in touch with family and friends, it’s even better to strive for impact.

We all have gifts, talents and skills that others would find useful, even in something as small as sharing an informed opinion online. Creating a digital footprint means that information about you will be at people’s disposal. Make it worthwhile.

Remember – it is an extension of you

Your online profile is an extension of you. No matter what opinion you publicly share online, it is linked to you. That is why it is advisable to think before you post.

Your online presence usually precedes you. It is what people are exposed to before they meet you in person.



CHAPTER ONE

Do you want to create an online profile, but aren't sure where to start? Look at the easy steps below.



CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE PROFILE PICTURE



WRITE A CONSISTENT PROFILE DESCRIPTION ACROSS YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS



YOUR BIO MAY INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- INTERESTS
- A SNAPSHOT OF YOUR PERSONALITY
- BUSINESS INFO (IF APPLICABLE)
- EDUCATION INFO (IF APPLICABLE)

THE NITTY GRITTY

LEARN THE ROLE THAT DIFFERENT SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS PLAY

SHARE OPINIONS

POST IMAGES/VIDEOS (IF YOU WANT TO)

DEVELOP CONTENT ACCORDING TO YOUR INTERESTS

CONNECT WITH PEOPLE

FIND OPPORTUNITIES

DOCUMENT YOUR EXPERIENCES

DON'T LIVE ONLINE. GET OFF YOUR PHONE. GO OUTSIDE AND TOUCH GRASS.

REPEAT!



Mindful posting practices

The impact of your posts

I always seem to think journals are a thing of the past purely because of how much people spew online.

It's often when there is backlash or widespread disapproval that one understands that the post wasn't such a good idea.

Since your online profile is an extension of you, it is best to be mindful of what you post. Always be tactful, even when sharing your heartfelt opinions.

What you say online influences the perception that employers, potential employers and the broader online community have of you. Negative posts can affect both your professional and personal relationships and ultimately your reputation.

If you're mindful about your posts, they can have a positive impact. A quality post can even lead to opportunities with brands, companies and people that you otherwise would have never known had they not caught wind of your post.

When something has the potential to change your life, always tread carefully.



CHAPTER TWO

Fact check

The spread of misinformation is rife, and has in many cases replaced the truth. If your post contains information about a real event, please verify it. A trustworthy online environment is only possible when fact-checking is done.

Here is a list of fact-checking sites that you can use to verify information:

Snopes - <https://www.snopes.com/>
Africa Check - <https://africacheck.org/>
SciCheck - <https://www.factcheck.org/scicheck/>

Respect one's privacy

Without a person's consent, you cannot share their sensitive personal information. It may be tempting to do so, especially if the person is your friend or relative. You cannot assume that consent has been given, so rather obtain it or refrain from sharing their personal information.

If you reside in South Africa, you would be familiar with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). There is a whole section on "consent" which I would recommend you read. You can access that section [here](#).

Respect boundaries

It's fortunate and unfortunate that most social media platforms provide tools which give strangers unsolicited access to a person (e.g. voice and video calls). That annoys me to no end and leaves me with no choice but to say the following:

“

Some of ya'll just be doing the most with that and I need ya'll to stop, as in YESTERDAY.

Respecting one's boundaries includes seeking consent before sharing one's sensitive information; refraining from pressuring them into activities they're not comfortable with, and sending them unsolicited content.



Protecting your personal brand

Journal, first. Social media, last.

Social media has replaced journaling. It has also replaced calling a friend.

We love to jot down our personal thoughts on social media, and we don't mind putting brands and people on blast at the same time.

While it's great to say how we feel, we should not see social media as a place to air it all out.

At the end of the day, these platforms are accessed by millions of strangers. So, unless you don't mind your thoughts being displayed on a billboard on one of the city's most popular highways, keep those thoughts to yourself. Always consider the fact that once something is online, its footprint remains there for a while.

Journal, call a friend, walk it off, make a cup of tea. Manage your emotions offline.

Protect your personal information

Houses, cars, clothing and gadgets are all valuable. You know what else is valuable? Your personal information.

Just because it is easy to find one's personal information doesn't mean you should be relaxed about where your personal information is stored.

The data mining market was valued at just over \$1 billion in 2023. Although it is linked to market research that helps to inform business growth, some people use it for fraudulent activities.

Refrain from participating in online games that ask you to share your personal information. This could assist people in cracking your passwords which are often made up of the very same information you are willing to give in those online games.

Review your privacy settings regularly

Social media platforms are constantly updating ways for you to control the access people have to you.

Strong privacy settings help create an invisible safety net.

There are still risks involved because everything man-made is not full-proof. No matter how well protected a profile can be, leaks still happen.

You can mitigate such risks by creating and reviewing strong privacy settings, regularly.

Online Crisis Management

(I had to make the heading smaller because of space, and I hate that it has messed with the whole look and feel... yohhh!!!)

We have all posted recklessly before. Facebook (I can't believe I'm still on that app) reminds me once in a while of posts I made 10 to 15 years ago. I cringe at some of the posts I used to make, but I am glad that I have since outgrown the recklessness.

As adults, we are not out of the woods just yet. Since we instinctively rush to post our thoughts instead of making a journal entry, there are times we may type something reckless, offensive or disrespectful. Before we know it, an online crisis ensues. How do we handle it? How do we manage the situation in a way that ends peacefully?

Have a look at different scenarios below, along with advice on how to handle them.

Scenario	The next steps
You have posted an offensive statement.	<p>While social media platforms allow for freedom of expression, there are times when we catch ourselves posting something offensive. Offensive statements often stem from lack of empathy towards others, ignorance, prejudice or disrespect.</p> <p>If the offensive statement targets an individual or group, it is important that you issue a public apology. Deleting the post and doing nothing to address the wrong in it, causes more harm. Acknowledge the offence you have caused and be sincere in your apology.</p> <p>Since some offensive statements are made out of ignorance, make an effort to reach out to the individual or group offended and ask to be educated, so that you do not repeat that. It is advisable to reach out to established organisations who can help you learn.</p>
You have posted something disrespectful about an individual.	<p>You are responsible for what you say, but you have no control over how someone will react to what you have said. Understand that there may be anger and retaliation to what you have said, so it is within your and the offended person's best interest to resolve the matter with haste.</p> <p>Reach out to the individual with a sincere apology, not defending your post, but acknowledging the harm the post has caused and sincerely apologise.</p>

	<p>Should you be asked by others about the ordeal, instead of locking your account or ignoring their questions, you can state the following: <i>"I have reached out to the party in question with an apology. I understand that my actions were wrong, and have expressed regret for what was posted. While I am free to express my thoughts, it should not be to the detriment of others."</i></p> <p>Sometimes an ordeal can end here. However, not all situations have such a desired ending. Depending on what was said, legal action could follow. That is why you should strive to think carefully about what you say online, as the consequences could be out of your control.</p>
<p>You have published a post that could potentially cost you your job.</p>	<p>Act quickly! The first recommended step is for you to delete the post immediately. Avoid the post gaining traction by deleting it. Deleting does not mean the problem is solved.</p> <p>Even if you have deleted the post, notify your line manager about what you have posted. This is perhaps the hardest part, but it is better for it to be brought to light by you than someone else.</p> <p>Where necessary, release a statement, especially if it has already gained traction online.</p> <p>Lastly, accept the consequences. Not all situations will leave you unscathed. Consequences are there for you to learn from. Accept the consequences that follow your actions, and grow.</p> <p>Should you be suspended from your job or worse, fired, when you secure a new job interview don't be afraid to state that you have learned from the experience of publishing posts that negatively affect your career, and provide details on how you have learned and grown from that. Remember, what you post online does not take away from your talent and work experience. You can still be an asset in whatever work environment you are placed in. The key is to learn from the negative experience and grow in wisdom.</p>

Final Words

Most of what we do lives online. Therefore, a digital footprint is difficult to erase. I encourage you to be mindful of how you carry your personal brand. Cultivate your personal brand by protecting it, and let it precede you positively.

It is such a joy to develop your personal brand, and you are in a unique position to carve your own narrative. Do it in a way that yields positive results.

If you found this eBook helpful, and you would like to get more guidance on how to communicate tactfully as a young professional, please [contact me](#). I offer online and in-person workshops for individuals and teams, and if you are an NPO, I offer a special rate!

Tactful communication is an underrated yet invaluable skill.

Visit my website for more helpful, free resources to keep you going as you strive to communicate tactfully.

- RUTH MTHEMBU