



How Social Media Can Impact Your Teen's Personal Brand

Five Questions to Guide a Family Discussion

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Yes, it's a new world out there! And, yes, it's one very different than when most of us parents were students. Without a doubt, one of the most significant differences is *this* digital-age reality: When an employer, landlord, potential romantic partner, and/or college admissions counselor wants to know a little something about who you are and how you think or behave, they quickly (and easily) turn to the Google-machine. A few clicks of the keyboard and, fortunately or unfortunately, what you have posted, shared and/or tweeted in the big new world of social media will likely have an impact on how they perceive you. At times, those perceptions can have a positive outcome. And sometimes, not so much.

But, know that as a parent you can help your teen think about their social media choices and how they will impact their "personal brand." Why not seize the opportunity to have a few important conversations about social media during the months leading up to your child's college launch? Consider the five key questions below a guide; each is one I've found helpful in conversations my husband and I have had with our own college-aged children about managing their online brand.

1. Is my social media behavior really part of my personal brand?

The answer is an easy one: Yes! And, the more our teens hear us talk about this truth, the more likely it is to actually stick. Of course, the more complicated part of the answer is that, yes, all of our social media choices can create perceptions that can sometimes help us (yay!) and sometimes hurt us (not yay). Pictures on Facebook of you volunteering at an orphanage in Honduras? Most likely = helpful as you apply to the pre-med program at your university. Pictures on Instagram of you wearing T-shirts with profane words printed across the front? Most likely = not creating a good impression for that interview with the pre-med counselor. Encourage your child to ask herself before every single post or comment: Would I be OK if this was published on the front page of my school's newspaper? If not, resist the urge to post it.

2. Will college counselors or future employers really look at the stuff I post?

The answer to this question is also rather simple: Yes, this is now standard practice! In recent surveys, more than 70 percent of employers report using social networking to do research on candidates, and more than 35 percent of college admissions counselors do as well. And, when college counselors were asked if what they found on a candidate influenced their decision to admit a student to their college or university, the majority said indeed, it did.

3. Are there specific things admissions counselors or employers are looking for?

Indeed, there are. And as you discuss this question, keep in mind that most young adults are persuaded by specific examples. As such, you can share this research: The types of social media posts that most often leave a negative impression with employers and college counselors are those that include:

- a. Complaining and negative comments
- b. Bad-mouthing others
- c. Profanity and/or sexist, racist defamatory comments about any individual or group
- d. Embarrassing photos or videos of self or others
- e. References to illegal activities (drugs, underage drinking)
- f. Sexual behavior
- g. Poor spelling and grammar (Yes, proofreading matters, even in social media!)

4. But social media posts will eventually disappear, won't they?

Unfortunately, this is also a pretty clear answer: No. Everything we post or share has the potential to be part of a permanent reputation we are building. Every tweet, video, like and comment can be captured as a screenshot and saved forever, long after we've deleted or edited it. As such, be sure to chat with your teen early and often about Question 1 above. Even if they roll their eyes each time you bring it up, it's better than an admissions counselor rolling their eyes when viewing your teen's most recent Instagram story.

5. How can social media help me build a positive personal brand?

This is such an important question because not all social media is bad! In fact, and in many cases, a college counselor or an employer will get a positive impression about an applicant's fit, interests and/or personality by scanning his social media content. As such, ask your child to simply spend 15 minutes this summer to reflect and honestly answer the question "If a college admissions counselor spent two hours researching my social media and online presence, what three words would they use to describe me?" By simply viewing their posts through the eyes of an admissions counselor or hiring manager, they can begin to understand the impact of their choices, and perhaps it will motivate them to proactively manage the digital aspects of their personal brand.

Interestingly, all of these questions apply to us parents, too, so we can all learn from this family discussion. As we parents are raising our teens in this ever-more complicated digital age, just remember: The little things we do (and encourage our children to do) matter! Also, don't forget to #breathe.