

How Clean Is Your Digital Footprint?

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While she's in the midst of a flurry of college applications, Lillian Donahue isn't taking the chance that a blemish from her digital footprint may be the difference between getting the thumbs up from Arizona State University, her top choice, and watching someone else get her acceptance letter.

Donahue is constantly reviewing her social media feeds – Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn – for things like suggestive or immature language that could be controversial or unsavory in the eyes of college admissions professionals who may be taking a peek at her online life. If she's not sure how a post may be received, it gets the ax. “Double, triple, quadruple check yourself,” says the senior at Ladue Horton Watkins High School in St. Louis, Missouri. “I know every single one of my colleges is looking.”

Digital DNA

Donahue's future employers may be looking, too, even years down the road. That's why it's important to know what's in your digital footprint and how to manage it to put your best foot forward online.

A digital footprint is all the stuff you post online on your social media accounts, in comment sections, while playing an app or sending an email. Every retweet, like or +1 is part of your online history, and could potentially be seen by people who are outside your circle of friends and acquaintances.

“Everything they do is part of their life, part of their profile,” says Don Goble, a high school broadcast and technology teacher who blogs at teachhub.com. “They are leaving digital DNA everywhere they go. Any kind of word or mark they leave is part of who they are and what they believe in.”

Donahue says she avoided some “serious trouble” by taking a joke off Twitter about one of her teachers. It was two years ago and, being new to the social media service, she didn't understand the context of the joke. “It turned out to not be funny at all and, vowing my innocence, I decided to always double check everything on social media, just in case it may be offensive,” she says.

And colleges are watching. According to a 2013 survey of college admissions officers by Kaplan, the company that makes test prep guides for the SAT and ACT, 29% of them have Googled an applicant, and almost the same number have checked a Facebook page or other social networking site to learn more about them.

Although most admissions staff aren't hitting the web to do their own research, the Kaplan study said that the percentages of those that have been on the rise in recent years – so it's only a matter of time before it becomes commonplace.

“College acceptance is highly competitive enough as it is,” Goble says. “Certainly we know that employers are trying to find any way to make their decision really easy about hiring someone, and colleges are doing it, too. With all things being equal, you don't want a Facebook post to be the deciding factor.”

On teachhub.com, Goble wrote an article about managing your digital footprint. Some of his tips were:

- Create a profile with simple, nonspecific details about yourself but that is still recognizable as you.
- Increase your privacy settings and use your public postings to be more professional and upbeat, sharing your accomplishments with everyone who's reading.
- When in doubt, use the Golden Rule – treat others as you'd like to be treated. If you wouldn't say something to a person's face, then don't leave it in a comment online.

The good news, however, is that the messages about keeping digital footprints clean seem to be working. The Kaplan survey that showed more college admissions officers were using Google and social media to check up on prospective students, also showed that the number of them finding something damaging dipped to 30%, or 5 percentage points lower than the previous year's survey.

“Social media is a great way to see a closer side of people,” Donahue says. “When universities or employers are looking at my sites, I want them to see a mature young adult, not someone who can't spell.”

Questions

Has Lillian Donahue done everything right on social media? What has she learned about her online persona and how to manage it?

Why do you think college admissions officers and employers are using social media to learn about prospective students and employees?

What might be some ways to improve your digital footprint for future employers?

Related Links

- [Forbes.com: 7 Things You Can Do To Build an Awesome Personal Brand](#)
- [Robert Half: Digital Footprints in the Job Search](#)
- [CIO: Six Social Media Mistakes that Will Kill Your Career](#)