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Social Media Use by US Navy Junior Sailors and Officers



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Purpose and Process

Research Question: How do 18-29 year-old sailors and officers inhabit social media spaces? In July and August 2015, we visited two carriers and 2 amphibious ships in Norfolk and San Diego that had recently returned from deployment. We conducted focus groups with 4 different age groups, the youngest 18-20 and oldest 27-29. 142 people participated - both enlisted and officers. We also conducted 15 one-on-one interviews with the ships' COs, XO's, CMCs and PAOs. Focus groups and interviews yielded 841 pages of transcripts that were analyzed for themes.



Findings

1. Four key considerations for social media use are OPSEC, safety, morale, and productivity. OPSEC and safety must be first and foremost. Morale appears to be closely related to internet access. Strong differing opinions exist among middle managers about the relationship between the use of social media and productivity. Research primarily shows that there tends to be a positive relationship between social media use and productivity.

2. Our data show that junior sailors and officers use social media in this order: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and Netflix. Their social media networks and the way sailors present themselves in these networks often vary by social media type. Study participants connect with others on social media in this order: friends, family, colleagues, brands, organizations, politicians.

3. Through social media, sailors touch thousands of US citizens and serve as Navy's brand ambassadors.

4. COs, XO's, CMCs see an increasing demand from young sailors for internet access and social media use and are having to develop policies that are enforceable. Many leaders are experimenting with different approaches that maximize OPSEC, safety, morale and productivity.



Recommendations

Think strategically about how social media can be used to improve performance and increase morale. Current thinking is too focused on one-way communication vs. multi-directional networks.

Turn communication upside-down. Use social media to listen to the troops and learn their unique perspectives (e.g. currently Navy crowd sourcing experiments).



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